

# on spec

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A.M. Arruin • Leah Bobet • Marie Brennan • David Clink • Wesley Herbert •  
Rose Hunter • Scott Mackay • Trevor Morrison • Gary Pierluigi • Chandra  
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The Last Necronomicon © Adrian Kleinbergen



## Return of the BLOG!

Remember, *On Spec* strives to keep you updated with current news & events between issues!

Link via **www.onspec.ca**

and leave us a comment or opinion piece (slime optional)!

**See you in cyberspace!**

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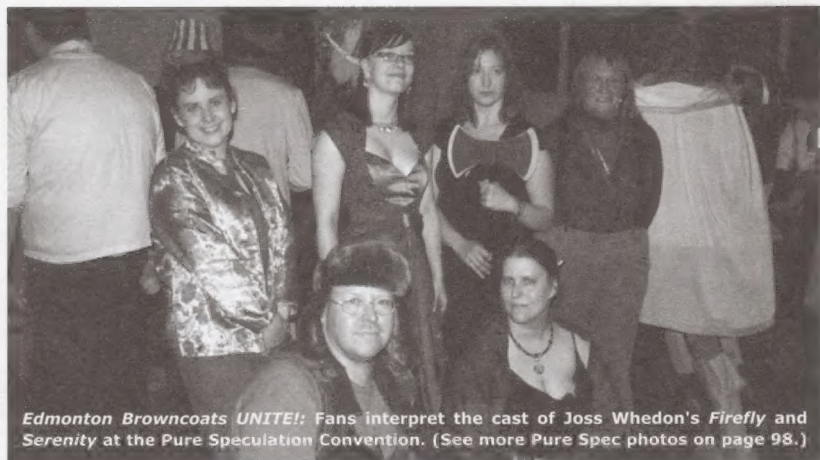
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**Edmonton Browncoats UNITE!:** Fans interpret the cast of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity* at the Pure Speculation Convention. (See more Pure Spec photos on page 98.)

# Building Community

Diane L. Walton, Managing Editor

As I write this, I have just spent a weekend visiting my *alma mater*, the University of Winnipeg, on the occasion of its 40th anniversary. I learned a great deal about how the U of W is reaching out to the physical community of its neighbourhood in Winnipeg's inner city, as well as to the multi-ethnic community of its current and prospective students. Less than a block away from the campus, for example, is the *Wii Chiiwaakanak* Learning Centre. It offers a plethora of resources for the university's 800 aboriginal students as well as for the future post-secondary students from the neighbouring inner-city community. By providing computers (and mentors) for the use of students who haven't got the technology at home, for example, it offers the disadvantaged students a more level playing field. The university is engaged with the local public schools in giving unique incentives to help the young First Nations students to stay in school, graduate, and have a fair shot at attending a post secondary institution, even if their personal financial resources are lacking. I heartily applaud them for this effort.

As we near our 20th year of operation, I realized that we here at *On Spec* should be doing more to reach out into our own communities, to encourage the growth of a new generation of writers. When we published our "Youth" theme issue in Winter 1990, it was an experiment. We wanted to see if we could sustain as many as three issues of the magazine in a year, and we wanted to see just how many young Canadian SF writers were out

there, practicing their craft. Canada had few role models in the SF writing community at the time, so we put out a call for stories by young writers under 23, to see what we could get.

The result was more than merely gratifying. It was astounding! It gave us the momentum to turn *On Spec* into a quarterly journal by our second year of operation. And more importantly, it introduced us to some amazing and promising new talents, such as the multi-faceted Cory Doctorow ([www.craphound.com](http://www.craphound.com)), and Edmonton's own Nicole Luiken Humphrey ([www.geocities.com/nmluiken](http://www.geocities.com/nmluiken)). As an aside, I just googled one of our other youth authors, Jeb Gaudet, who wrote a story called *Portrait of a Psychopath*. What's he doing now? Well, Dr. Gaudet is an Assistant Professor, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Calgary.

The years went by, and we often talked about doing another Youth issue, but the idea remained on the back burner. So I am taking this opportunity to announce that in the Fall of 2008, *On Spec* will publish a brand new Youth-themed issue of short fiction, art and poetry. In the next couple of months we'll put out an official call for submissions, so you are hearing this first, folks! We will be looking for new works by writers, poets and artists, ages 15 to 23. We will also be looking for private sponsorship to help us to provide cash prizes for the winners of the competition. All authors of stories selected for the special issue will be paid our standard rates. There may even be a multi-media supplement to the printed magazine, with music, spoken word performance and even drama. At this time, anything is possible. Keep watching our web site for announcements and deadlines for submissions.

In our current issue, we're bringing you some familiar *On Spec* faces, as well as some new ones. Leah Bobet ([www.leahbobet.com](http://www.leahbobet.com)), a rising talent in the Canadian SF writing community, was the winner of our 2003 Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize for her first *On Spec* story, *With the Help of Your Good Hands*, published in our "Shakespeare" theme issue (Winter, 2002). Since then, five of her stories have been featured in our magazine (*Midnights on the Bloor Viaduct*, Summer 2004; *Bliss*, Winter 2004; *Metis*, Winter 2005; *Lagtime*, Summer 2006; *And its Noise as the Noise in a Dream*; *And its Depth as the Roots of the Sea*, Fall 2006). We're proud to present her new story, *The Sorceress' Assistant* in this issue. And be sure to read our new feature—an extended author bio section—featuring Leah.

An old friend of ours, Wesley Herbert (*Crossroads*, Fall 1992; *Too Clean to be Dead*, Spring 1994; *Director's Cut*, Summer 1994; and *Twilight of the Real*, Winter 1997), is back with *The Blood of a Virgin is Hard to Come By*

*Legitimately*. (You can guess where that one's going.) Also returning to our pages is Scott Mackay ([www.scottmackay.net](http://www.scottmackay.net)) author of *Final Improvement*, Fall 1999; *Freeze Damage*, Winter 2000; *The Sangoma*, Winter 2006, and several excellent novels. His story, *The Pursuer* will have you on the edge of your seats.

Chandra Rooney is "making the internet a nicer place one review at a time"—visit [www.sora-blue.livejournal.com](http://www.sora-blue.livejournal.com) to see what we mean, then read her first contribution to *On Spec*, the story *Rainy Season*. Other writers new to our pages include Rose Hunter, with *Night Visitor*; Marie Brennan, with *Nine Sketches*, in *Charcoal and Blood*, Greg Wilson with *But With a Whimper*, and Trevor Morrison with *A Coil of Thread*.

We also have new poetry by David Clink ([www.poetrymachine.com](http://www.poetrymachine.com)), A.M. Arruin and Gary Pierluigi.

That's just a small taste of what is to come in this Fall issue. Pour yourself a good cup of chai, sit back, and enjoy. •

Dust the spells. Play with them,  
talk to them: they get fractious  
when ignored.

## The Sorceress' Assistant

Leah Bobet

He came to her door on a cold winter night, and begged her to use him kindly.

The Sorceress looked down at him from the threshold her father had designed to elevate the greeter, intimidate the supplicant. Her eyes were tired: she had been peering at books of great spells all day and night. The words of a great spell never sat still: they wiggled and writhed and tried to skulk from one's notice, and it took a Sorcerer's focus to keep them in place. This man, this middle-aged, bent-backed, freezing wild-eyed man had broken it in two.

"What use would I have for you?" she asked, and he swayed like a young tree.

"I will assist you. I will keep your house," he mumbled, his lips blue with cold. Winter was not kind here on the Icebound Sea, far from the shores of the delta, where towns clustered and worked the river.

She had never taken an assistant before. She had no need. "What is your name?" she asked. Her voice hit like a thunderclap: it left the smell of ozone in its wake.

"Gerald, of—" the man said, and collapsed.

The Sorceress called a golem to carry Gerald of No Place into her tower and went back to her books.

A day and a night passed. Gerald woke.

He remembered cold; he remembered a dry cold that ate at his bones and gave no snow to drink. He did not remember dusty silk sheets, or a fire fueled with a wood he'd never smelled burning, or the brush of a long-fingered spirit against his cheek.

He sat up.

His head spun; he clutched at the bed sheets, blinked at the even-spaced boards of the floor. His bag of tools was there, the catch untouched. He sank back into the sheets, weak with relief. *I've made it.*

"Assistant," the spirit whispered. "Eat, drink. She would see you." It set a tray of delicacies upon his lap: smoked fish that melted against the tongue, sharp cheeses, fresh-baked bread made of grains that only a noble Sorceress could afford. The spirits bathed him and dressed him in soft clothes, green and brown and crimson, then led him up the stairs to the summit of the Sorceress's tower.

They came upon her reading, her gown disheveled, her hair hastily pinned and falling limp and dirty. She perched in stacks of books like a sparrow, her elegant back bent with concentration. Pale sunlight lit the room, reflected off the ice. There were no candles, and it was cold.

"Gerald of No Place," she said, and inclined her head, her eyes fixed on the thick and yellowed parchment page. "I am glad that you are well."

The name stirred nervousness in his belly; he clutched it to keep it still. "Thank you, mighty Sorceress," he whispered. "I thank you again for your mercy, your hospitality—"

She cut him off with a gesture, sharp but not unkind. "Why were you wandering the wastes?"

He shook his head. There was a blank spot in his memory, one dusted over by snow, covering a seed of the direst importance. "I don't know, mighty Sorceress," he said, and the nervousness settled into pain.

The Sorceress frowned. She placed a hand on her book, palm flat to hold the words in place, and beckoned him closer. She pressed her hand to his forehead, and the coolness of an autumn river flowed through his mind, swirled down into his body.

She lifted her hand, and dusted it against her skirts. "Someone has cast quite the spell upon you, Gerald of No Place," she said, and tilted

her head. "Perhaps you sought me out to remove it?"

He blinked; she sighed. "I can't do anything without the asking, you know. Dust the spells. Play with them, talk to them: they get fractious when ignored. Split wood for the tower, and do the washing, and keep things clean: the spirits are good but flighty, and they often forget."

Gerald swallowed fear and spit; they slid commingled down his throat and into his aching stomach. "Yes, my lady," he said to the Sorceress, before he realized she had stopped listening. Her face narrowed in concentration as she turned a page, her fingers tongs on the edge of the paper. He watched her for a moment, two, and then went downstairs to begin his labours.

• • •

The spirits of the tower did not like him.

When Gerald made tea they knocked over the kettle, stuck the pump, hissed and howled as he measured leaves into the pot. When he chopped wood they rocked his arm, made his strokes fly wild, pushed the split logs from his hands. When he scrubbed the floor they made him slip and stumble until his old bones ached. They let him be when he replaced the beams of the tower, fearing to interrupt that delicate task: the stones had been laid by giants, and none knew what spells lingered in the cracks between them.

In the evenings, while the Sorceress puzzled over her spells, Gerald of No Place puzzled over the contents of his bag. His hammers were fine but worn; his knife and striker were the dull no-colour of a poor man's tools. There were three fine blocks of wood in the bag, each the size of a man's head, and he weighed them in his hands night after night, feeling out the shapes that lurked just inside.

The Sorceress greeted breakfast, or lunch, or supper with a frown and a grunt, hands quivering over tomes of wood and paper and leather and leaves. With every meal he opened his mouth to denounce the spirits' ways, to ask for some great task so she might remove the spell upon him. He waited for her to smile, meet his eye. She never did.

Instead Gerald sat in the kitchen and seethed, anger heating him where stone and wood and spells could not. Dark was falling, midafternoon in the wastes on the Icebound Sea; it was midwinter and there was nothing left to do. Gerald lit a lamp in his rooms and set to carving.

The wood curled under his knife; it smelled sweet and dry as the wood burned in the tower, in the fire he stoked while she pursed her lips and ignored him. The fragments of it, chips and whittles, gathered on his floor and whispered in strange tongues. The spirits hovered, not daring to interrupt.

When he looked up, the block curved into a rough-woven rope, fibres prickling in polished wood, cat's-tongue sharp against his hands. It knotted up and up into the sky, wrapped around itself into a hangman's noose. Gerald frowned; the knot in the back of his mind, frozen in winter ice, stirred and subsided.

He put aside his carving and went up to the tower. It was dim: the coals whispered stories to each other, tales of books unopened in his lifetime. He stirred the fire and the light built flickering, then steady.

"M'lady Sorceress," he said, hesitant, his pride burning steadier yet. "I beg you to remove the spell. I'll do whatever you ask for payment: you took me in. You saved my life."

She was silent, unmoving, her back a rictus of concentration. Gerald stepped closer, closer than he had ever dared approach. "My Lady?" he whispered, awe and new-old tenderness. She looked so human in this light.

The Sorceress was asleep in a nest of her books. A spell crawled up her fingers, into her sleeve, and vanished.

Gerald went back down the stairs and to bed.

He woke in his silken sheets; they frayed at the corners now from his rough laundering. He cooked and split wood and fed the fire, and the Sorceress did not look up, did not answer when he asked again if she might remove the spell crouched inside his head. The third time his pride failed him, and he slunk away to carve.

He worked long into the night, hands firm and then shaky, slipping, moving slow about a surface that grew polished with his touch. Words flitted through the spell-tied knot in his brain: memories, flickers of ice-light, coal-whispers he could not understand.

Morning peeked hesitant into the tower, and he woke with his knife slipping to the floor from one hand and a finished noose in the other, rattling death against the floorboards of the tower until it echoed through the wastes. The spirits of the tower hissed at him, rattled the hanging pots and brushed between his ankles, tripping him on his way to the wood-cellar, the kitchen, the chamber pot. They spilled his

tea and leered, pinched, poked. Gerald grabbed for a weapon and found the carved noose, held it out before him, its curve inches from the spirits' slender throats.

And they paused as one, eyes draining to blankness, and fell into step behind him. Gerald touched the curve of the wooden noose, and they shuddered.

His breath caught; he stared. He had made a magic.

"Very well," he said with an unpleasant smile, and finished cleaning the floor unmolested.

• • •

Gerald kept his magic in his pocket; it poked into his thigh and rode with him up and down the tower steps, and everywhere it went the spirits followed. They processed behind him to the Sorceress's door with breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea. Every time he said her name and waited for her moonless-night eyes to note how he, a poor man, had made a magic. She never looked up.

He took out the second block after a week's time, when twisting the spirits into contorted shapes, making them scrub the floors, hissing and jeering in their faces had paled as entertainment. He turned it over and over in his hands, and thought of what magic he would like to make, now that he could make it.

He dreamed of the Sorceress that night, her back straight, or bent, or turned to him, of her pale, sun-banished skin and old man's eyebrows and all that ice-light focus bent upon himself. He woke breathless and frozen, the delicious thrill of being preyed upon in his limbs, and swallowed, and went to put on the tea.

He carved the second block through the night, and the next night, and the next; he carved it into the shape of a knot twisted between memories, something crouched and cold and foreign. He woke with the knife on the floor, one hand on his noose, the other on an ugly, misshapen thing with no beginning or end. He ran fingers over the wood, rough prickly wood that caught at skin and tugged. Each touch echoed in the spell on his head; each touch dizzied him with intimacy.

Gerald set his second carving into the fireplace and stoked the coals around it.

The wood burned slow. The chains wrapped round his memories fell as the bread rose in the ovens; the doors to his name unlocked as the dishes soaked after lunch; the whole thing swung wide between one bite of supper and the next, and Gerald of No Place knew again who he was.

"I have broken it myself," he whispered, and danced barefoot on the cold kitchen floors while the spirits watched, openmouthed and frightened. "I have broken it myself!" he crowed into the wastes by the Icebound Sea, and nobody was there to hear him.

"I have broken it myself," he said, every inch the gravity and pride he had practiced in the bedroom, the wood-cellar, and the kitchens when he brought up the Sorceress's breakfast.

"Mm," she said, maybe to him, and shoved a lock of hair fading to early silver behind her ear.

Gerald's shoulders sagged. He simmered until he longed to shout, to burn books, to rip the pages from great works of magic until she would merely glance at him. He carved the third block, all night awake until dawn. As the morning light crept into his rooms low and thin, he saw it held the roughed-out shape of a face.

• • •

*Go to the Sorceress on the Icebound Sea, the wizard had said in tones that rung of spell-words, but not so much as the Sorceress's, and bring back her magic to me.*

Gerald of the Lake Country in the central delta, of McAllister's Forge outside the city, turned the mask back and forth between his hands, saw the roughed-out nose sharp as a knife blade, the pursed lips, the lines between the eyebrows drawn down and fixed in thought.

*And in return?* he had asked back then, mouth open, eyes amazed at the dazzling lights of the wizard.

The wizard had shown him a piece of land, land that was good and rich and clean; a copse of trees on one side, a river running past it, the road to the north gate of the city beyond. *I will give you my lands on Calendar Point, he said, his breath hot as dirty furnaces wanting cleaning at the end of a long day's labour. And you, smith's assistant, wearying away with age and time, will be owner of a forge.*

His mouth had opened. His mouth had shut again, thinking it was

the great wizard's power—not so great as the Sorceress's—that robbed him of speech. So he took the wizard's three blocks of wood, the wizard's map, the wizard's money for the journey. He took the wizard's paper packet, and was told he would know when to use it and how.

The packet was not in his bag; the packet was not with his possessions.

Gerald paced and rubbed his hand up and down the carved noose, making the spirits jerk and writhe, not caring for their pain. What if it was lost in the snows of the wastes? What if it was sold for a roof and crust of bread? What if it was destroyed, and the wizard came for his head?

Gerald searched his room, hunting and fretting and replacing it all when his hands turned up empty still. He sent the spirits to every corner of the tower, and they whistled and wailed and did not come back. He rifled through the poor man's clothes he had not looked at since arriving, and found nothing. He slipped his hand in the lining of his old coat, hung up stinking in the cellars of the tower, too thick to launder until a spring breeze could dry it. A paper packet shifted, found his fingers, and he tugged it out between stitch and stitch.

It was full of white powder, fine as a single layer of snow. Gerald sniffed it carefully, and its sweetness was violence in the back of his throat. The spirits drew back, sparking with fury.

"What is this?" he asked the nearest, his hand laid light about the rope where it curved round itself, above the knot that broke a killer's skull.

*Not magic, it whispered. Not fish, or fowl, or vegetable, or mineral, or soul. Poison.*

"Oh," Gerald said, and passed it between his hands. Neither one wanted to hold it too long. He put it back into the lining and glared to the southwest, where he thought the delta and Calendar Point lay.

"I shall not do it," he said to the wizard, who was not powerful enough to hear. The spirits looked away as they did when they heard a lie.

• • •

Gerald carved the mask by firelight, by moonlight, and when he was finished he was startled at how long he must have studied the face of the Sorceress. It was sharp-angled and sweet, focused and determined, and even held up to his face, its blank and empty eyes

did not look at him.

Hands shaking, heart fearful, the whispered words of confession upon his lips, Gerald climbed the steps of the Sorceress's tower.

She was hard at work, holding manuscripts down with her thigh, maps with her outstretched left foot, and one book on her lap, in her strong, spirit-fingered hands.

"M'lady Sorceress," he said, low and choked and repentant, "I remember now why I was sent here."

She frowned and ran her finger along the page. The ice-light shifted, a cloud moving across the sun, dimming and then brightening the smoky, silent room.

He shifted, one foot to the other, fed another log to the fire. It smoked, blowing the scent of magic across his nose; his mouth watered as if it were a feast day.

"M'lady Sorceress," he said again, his voice breaking. "I have learned magics in your house. I've bent your spirits to my will and tormented them, and I am not sure what sort of man I am now. I wish... your mercy."

The Sorceress shifted, breath hissing from between her teeth. A book fell to the floor from the stacks beneath her, and she reached out a hand to subdue it.

"M'lady Sorceress," he shouted, blood hot in his face. "I have done all this treason and I am *still* not worth your attention?"

"Assistant, I am *working*," she snapped, her knuckles white upon the page, her nails unkempt, her muscles coiled. Her eyes blazed, dark and endless, and he fell back, fell away, fled down the stairs of the tower to its lowest reaches and held himself huddled in the woodpile that smelled of magic and neglect and time.

An hour passed, two. Anger coalesced in Gerald's stomach, low and cold as the floors he washed every Sunday. He walked on legs of ice to where his coat hung, empty as a corpse in the corner, and pulled the paper packet from its lining.

He slipped a fingertip of the powder into her afternoon tea. The tree-spirits and rock-spirits and tower-stones thrashed and flailed, batting at him with arms that had lost the power to comfort or condemn. He locked them in his room with the sigil and took the Sorceress her tea and pastries.

It took a week for her to sicken, blinking feverishly at the rebellious

shapes of blood-ink words. By the tenth day the packet was empty, and the Sorceress had taken to her bed for the first time in her long, long life.

Gerald mopped her brow and spooned mashed winter apples into her mouth with the solicitous voice and hard eyes of a loyal assistant. He changed her bedpan, held water to her lips, gloried in the way her eyes followed every movement of his hands, every touch of a finger.

"Do you see me now?" he whispered, when she had fallen into a shallow, rattling sleep. "Do you hear me now, Lady Sorceress?"

She made no reply, but he no longer required one.

On the fourteenth day she roused, and asked the hour and the date. Gerald gave it to her quietly, relishing how her lips shaped his words after he spoke them, how her body bent to focus on every shift of his hands.

"Oh," the Sorceress said, and her mouth worked. "I seem to have lost track of time."

"Yes, m'lady," he said, and pulled the blankets up to her chin.

"I'm afraid I'm dying," she said after a moment, and the first flicker of emotion to touch Gerald's heart in days took root.

"Sorceress," he asked, head bowed so his gaze traced the flagstones set by her ancestors, the giants. "Why did you take me in?"

Her lips worked, their girlish plumpness lost to time and illness, to years spent chasing the unknown. "Pity," she said, "and compassion."

Gerald sucked in a breath. "You are a cruel mistress, Lady Sorceress."

She blinked at him, her eyes mild. It seared his pride like hot iron. "I told you I'd no need of an assistant."

He nodded, and refreshed her tea. Her eyes strayed to the table, where the mask sat. There was no sense in concealing it anymore. "How much did the mayor's wizard pay you?" she asked.

Gerald swallowed back tears, shame, anger. "Lands at Calendar Point," he said. "My own forge."

"You might as well do it then," she replied, her eyes fixed on some spell fluttering between the rafters. "I won't have waste."

Gerald of No Place nodded, and set the death-mask gently on her face. It took a breath in and exhaled.

The spells stirred, sitting up in their books. The coals of the fireplace dimmed. The wind held its breath, and the mask inhaled, exhaled again. Gerald lifted it from the corpse of the Sorceress of the Icebound Sea, and every spell in her tower turned crisp as soldiers to face him.

He turned the mask in his hands, brushed its lips with one fingertip, and realized the tower was very silent.

"All I wanted was for you to answer," he whispered to the corpse, and shut its eyes with one hand. Magic came off on his skin, and he dusted it on the sheets. The spirits watched him, the spells watched him, and though they were neither of them capable of reproof, shame settled in the pit of his stomach.

The Sorcerer Gerald, smith's assistant, Sorceress's assistant, went down to the kitchen and waited for spring.

• • •

Weather came slowly to the wastes off the Icebound Sea: it rolled in like affection, or guilt, or the slow building of cities and their slower falling down. Gerald scrubbed the floors every week and mended the walls. He cooked and tidied three meals and one afternoon tea every day. He tended to the spells and played with them, so they did not get lonely, and carved houses from wood and wax for them when they cried for her touch. They settled into the carved shapes—bears and trees and thimbles, innocuous things—and when he touched them they rose to his hands and made his skin tingle with power.

One day a warm breeze melted the ice in the flues, a day of rain inside the chimney-pipes. Gerald packed his things in the waterproofed canvas bag, put on his coat and hat, and stepped outside.

He stepped off the threshold her father had designed to elevate the greeter, intimidate the supplicant, into the budding spring. The snow was melting; the first shoots of foolhardy crocus peeked above brown mud. "It's not worth it," he told them sternly, and shut up the tower behind him. Without the Sorceress the books would molder and rot; the spirits would fade; the magics would sleep.

The spells trooped behind him, blank-eyed and obedient to the whisper-words that fluttered through the lips of the Sorceress's death-mask. They left no footprints in the dying snow.

The Icebound Sea was cracking, great rents shuddering its skin, through which whales surfaced to smell the quickening air. He walked to the nearest town, found a boat, an iron-hulled icebreaker, and took passage for the lands of the delta. At night the sailors whispered tales of the Sorceress of the Icebound Sea and her works, how she looked

kindly on the poor and lifted the downtrodden. Gerald clutched the death-mask to his chest, cradled cheek and lips and nose, and wept.

There was a piece of land in the delta, across the river from the sleepy city where the Duke's summer palace nestled. It had a river running past it, and a copse of new-growing trees. Gerald felt deep in his bag, where the wooden face of his Sorceress nestled cheek-to-cheek with his hammer; the waxen shapes of spells brushed his fingers, told him lovingly not to fear the wizard, for he was nothing next to their mistress. He swallowed guilt and bile and hot ambitious murder, and planned his road home.

Where the wizard's house was left, he turned right. Where the road led to his reward, he ducked into the shadowed forest. When he came to the glade across the river from the city, he dug his hands into the soil and it was good, clean, and rich, empty of envy or reprisal.

*I will hunt your heart if you fail*, the wizard's voice whispered to him from a day long ago, a life long forgotten. The wizard's hands had been so tidy, pale and clean.

"I will hunt your heart anyway," Gerald whispered into the trees. "And you yourself taught me to kill sorcerers."

He slept under the stars that night, and the next day he began plotting his forge. •



## Leah Bobet: In Her Own Words

### Featured Artist Extended Biography

Leah Bobet grew up in Vaughan, Ontario with her head in the clouds. Or under the blankets with a flashlight and a book. Or behind the couch, with a box of crackers and a book. Thanks to a first grade teacher and a school librarian who colluded to let her at the eighth-grade library books, she graduated to her mother's collection of Beagle and McKillip in short order. Years of stealing books back and forth followed, during which she started to write.

It didn't last.

She spent most of high school in choirs and amateur theatre, playing Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Aunt Eller in *Oklahoma!*, and the elderly juror in *Twelve Angry Men*, and running lights and sound boards when not onstage. She also tried her hand at watercolours and pottery, was part of a (very) short-lived rock band, and wrote a term paper on the death penalty in the form of a Gilbert and Sullivan musical.

After an aborted shot at becoming a professional opera singer she began writing fiction again in 2001, with one of her first sales going to *On Spec's* Shakespeare theme issue. With time, elbow grease, and the help of good friends met on the Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction and Fantasy, she has published over thirty short stories and twenty-five poems. Her fiction has appeared multiple times in *Strange*

*Horizons* and *Realms of Fantasy*, won second place in the *Chiaroscuro* annual short fiction contest, and has been reprinted in *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy for Teens*, *Science Fiction: The Best of the Year 2006*, and *Best New Fantasy 2*. She is a recipient of the Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize and her poetry has been nominated for the Rhysling and Pushcart Prize.

She now lives in Toronto, and is completing a degree in linguistics and English literature with specialties in language change and dialectology at the University of Toronto. This equips her to explain to people in technical terms why Americans think Canadians say *about*, which is fun at parties. She has worked for three years at Bakka-Phoenix Books, Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore, a hotbed of sedition and science fiction writers. She was a founding editor for the webzine *Abyss & Apex*, and is now Associate Editor at *Ideomancer Speculative Fiction*. Being a part of three aspects of the publishing industry—writing, editing, and bookselling—has taught her just how hard working in publishing is, and how much passion is involved on each and every level.

She divides her free time between studying bellydance, a windowsill herb garden that's spilling off both windowsills and onto the kitchen table, an old blue acoustic guitar, gourmet cooking, and a fascination with urban spaces, specifically Toronto's generally-obscured but fascinating history. She would love to do some urban exploration but doesn't have the guts. She is also a Toronto Maple Leafs fan and will be off the radar Saturday nights between October and April. This makes her an uneasy mix of goth, hippie, and jock, which is perhaps not what people mean when they talk about the war inside one's soul.

Currently Leah is working on two recalcitrant novels—one New Weird fantasy, one which can only be described as odd—and co-writing a noir graphic novel about clones and serial killings with comics writer and blogger Ken Lowery.

News, publications, and everyday silliness is available—although not in the third person—on her website at [www.leahbobet.com](http://www.leahbobet.com), and more regularly at her blog. •

When I look over, it's no one  
whose name is programmed  
into my phone book, but it's a  
number I vaguely recognize so  
I pick it up, out of curiosity.

# The Night Visitor

Rose Hunter

At two-thirty or thereabouts my phone rings. It's lying on the wooden floorboards, so the noise it makes—with the vibrate function on, and right next to my ear—is like a buzz saw cutting into my dream. In fact, it's no louder than the *Airbourne Killer!* coverage on the TV, but I'm used to sleeping through that.

When I look over, it's no one whose name is programmed into my phone book, but it's a number I vaguely recognize so I pick it up, out of curiosity.

"It's Rich," a voice announces.

"Rich? Oh. How are you?" I say, instead of: What the hell are you doing calling me at—I glance at the clock on the phone—a quarter to *three*? Rich is my nitwit younger brother's friend, whom I made the mistake of talking to a few times, and now he thinks he can bug me any time he wants.

He says something unintelligible, and then: "I'm looking for faith."

Oh, drunk as a skunk too. Lovely. "You've probably called the wrong number then."

"Can I come over?"

"N—"

"I'll be there in five minutes."

I toss the phone onto my comforter and stare at the TV.

"—scientists have begun to apply the power of genomics and molecular biology to understand how the mosquito detects the chemical clues that lead it to its targets," a woman from the Centre for Disease Control, Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases, begins.

The picture goes to black and briefly to static, like the HBO lead-in.

"We interrupt this program to bring you breaking news, in the West End, there's some confusion—"

Now we're behind a bouncing camera, clamouring for space near a woman prostrated over an infant, the woman raising her head every few seconds to scream: "They killed him!"

"—after *two hours* here in the street, as you can see, inadequately covered herself—" (a man is trying to put some netting over the woman's head but she keeps shaking him off)—"after waiting two hours—"

"—as you know, emergency teams are stretched well beyond capacity—"

This isn't breaking news; it was on when I was falling asleep. I think the same thing I thought then: The kid would have died anyway. Hardly any children survive it. This one—three or four years old, tops—forget it. Better the rescue teams spend their time on people they actually have a chance of saving—which is probably what they were doing.

The phone rings again.

"I'm outside your door," Rich says.

"Oh, Christ."

I buzz him into the building and put on my gloves. I'm opening my door when I see him coming towards me; an apparition in white and cream, and stinking like the proverbial brewery. He almost falls straight inside but I push him back into the hallway and close the door while I dust him down, to make sure none of the little shits are clinging to him.

"I was near work, looking at the buildings," he says, after I give him the all-clear. Then he comes in, takes off his sweater and gloves, and a cap with netting that covers the back of his neck and his face. I keep an eye on it as he takes off his shoes, run my gloved hands down his lower legs and around his skinny ankles, check between the folds in his socks.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"Layoffs were announced today," he rambles. "I mean I'm fine, I'll always be fine, I'm one of the best at what I do, one of the best," he emphasizes, while I think: Here we go, please, not at this hour, I have to sit through one of his *there's only a few people in the world who know how to do what I do* speeches. Rich is one of those computer whiz-kids. Pretty annoying.

But I ask: "Do you want to smoke a joint?"

"Sure," he says. While I'm in the kitchen, retrieving my stash from the back of the cutlery drawer, he calls out, "Do you have work, still?"

"Yeah. Less shifts, but it should cover me for food, and rent, I hope—"

Oh, brother. Back in the main room, he's in my bed (my mattress on the floor), comforter over his lap, bony arms folded in front of him. A glance at the pile of clothes nearby—tartan boxer shorts flung on top—confirms that he's naked.

"Uh, Rich."

He juts his neck forward, which makes him look like a stork, or a goose, or some other long-necked bird, and squints as though he's having trouble making me out, which he probably is—at least having trouble making out *one* of me.

I sit on the floor and start cutting up the bud on the *Holy Bible*, which happens to be within reach.

"Bedtime reading?" he asks.

"Yup." I light the joint from the flame of the citronella candle, take a puff and hand it to him. "That was some quick disrobing."

"Oh." He pulls the comforter up to his chest, like now he's vaguely embarrassed. "Yeah—sorry."

"Some kind of record. If I had a stopwatch."

He says, "You know I'm completely infatuated with you, right?"

"No, you're not."

"Why do you never believe anything I say?"

"—now with this strain exhibiting resistance to the larvicides, one tactic being mentioned is the development of a large scale attractant, which could collect the population in vats—"

"—but we're talking substantial development time, time we don't have—"

"—spraying adulticide in residential areas proving effective—"

“—while large numbers of mosquitoes survive by flying away or finding shelter in gutters, eaves, birdbaths and other—”

“—it’s what we’ve got, at the moment, to keep the situation under control—”

“—no evidence that the disease is being spread through human-to-human contact—*no evidence*—”

“—yes, we need to reiterate—”

“—people are dying. People are watching their *children* die—”

I switch it off. The last thing that fades is the slug line, thick black type outlined in red, with a mosquito image holding at the start of the line what looks like a lance or an elegant walking stick.

“Why doesn’t anyone think that logo’s too cartoony for this?”

“I see your point,” Rich says, inhaling, then coughing, which drops the comforter to his waist, re-exposing his slightly depressed sternum and the outlines of his ribs. “But it’s only because I’m intimidated by you.”

“What? Oh, Rich.”

“Well, look at you, you’re so—” he doesn’t finish. “Don’t tell me you would have accepted if I had, like, asked you out.”

“So you figure better off to show up at my place drunk, strip, and scramble into my bed. Because I’m so much more likely to respond to *that*—”

“Might as well. You know we could all be dead soon.”

“I can’t believe you’re trying that one on.” I hold out my fingers for the joint. Any more pot and he’ll have trouble finding his way home and the last thing I need, the *last* thing, is some drunk stoned kid in my space for the rest of the night.

I switch the TV back on. Someone on the TV is talking about breeding sites and making sure rain gutters aren’t clogged. And emptying those birdbaths.

“I had no idea birdbaths were so popular,” I start shouting. “I mean, how many people do you know have *birdbaths*? And out of those, how many do you think haven’t gotten around to taking care of that? After being reminded of it every single day?”

“I guess they’re just making sure,” Rich says.

“Enough already with the birdbaths, is all I’m saying. The problem is bigger than this.”

He shrugs. I pinch off the joint, set the roach beside the ashtray

then toss Rich his pants.

"Time to go. E-vac-u-ate," I say, imitating the military commander, a media favourite brought in to (his own words) "kick some butt"—meaning forcibly remove people living near the lake, who refuse to relocate to less infested areas.

Rich flounders around, getting dressed. In the dim light his silhouette reminds me of one of Giacometti's walking men. From this angle he seems to have even the oversized feet.

"I lost a sock," he announces, lifting the comforter, peering under it, letting it go. The flame of the citronella candle twitches. "This is your sock." He holds it up. "I might have to avail"—he hiccups—"myself of it instead."

Might have to? He puts on the sock. I scoop up his wallet, cell phone, keys, various scraps of paper, loose change, and a key-ring size bottle of DEET—all on the floor. He pats his pockets, as though what I'm holding are a bunch of things that look like his but actually cannot be. I make sure his gloves are pulled securely over his sweater, to cover his wrists, and that the netting of his cap is tucked into his collar, front and back. I stretch his socks over the top of his trousers too, so it looks like he's wearing knickerbockers, like some demented golf pro of the 1920's. Finally, I poke my head out the door and watch him trace an arc down the hallway, towards the wall—then veer off towards the other wall.

I'm a bit high but still I think: What are the chances he'll check his clothes properly when he gets home? He'll be lucky to remember to shut the *door*. Christ.

"Rich. Come back here."

I sit on the floor and watch TV as he sleeps, in his trousers and shirt this time, one leg flung at an angle across the mattress. He snores. More are infected. In a city of people in versions of full-body armour, I guess it's a miracle when two of them manage to share a simple joint. •

Engineering: is installation  
of new device advantageous  
or disadvantageous to  
Unit 724's survival?  
Response: undetermined

# The Pursuer

Scott Mackay

Unit 724, receiving new visual inputs. Query: is new visual input/device useful in eluding the pursuer? Device appears of intelligent Martian design, but nowhere identified in Unit 724's memory. Eighteen centimeters, by 14 centimeters, by 6 centimeters, a three-dimensional oblong with rounded contours.

Unit 724: visuals to the rear. Perceive: the pursuer is 1,642 meters south of Unit 724.

Focus: New visual input equals device. Nature of device still not identified. Universal adapter probes, assess new device. Locomotion properties: nil. Velocity potentials: nil. Dexterity possibilities: nil. Strategizing. Unit 724, please stand by. Query device. A weapon? A threat? Something the pursuer will use against Unit 724 should it fall into the pursuer's hands?

Stand-down / Interruption / cannot stand down, the pursuer is now 1,476 meters behind Unit 724.

Lift device using one of three legs. Initiate: forward gait, speed 25 kilometers per hour, employ shock absorbers, log new device for future possible use, dodge pursuer's hadron foil, incoming, 160 degrees to the median right, electro-pulse warhead of the muscular-motor variety, detonation in 3, 2, 1...

Initiate blast shielding.

Roll to a forward stop, clutch new unit, log query: will it be the answer, something Unit 724 can at last use to get rid of the pursuer? Locomotion: increase to 50 kilometers per hour. Damage control, assess. Dorsal appendage compromised by 67 percent. Implement gyrostabilizer adjustment, 67 percent to the frontal aspect, increase velocity to 92 kilometers per hour. Access map. Location: 17.1 kilometers south of Valles Marineris.

Access conditions: sky clear, temperature minus 63 Celsius, barometric pressure, .8 millibars.

Contact status: contact status with satellite qH 127 intermittent. Evasion strategy from satellite qH 127 ambiguous and open to interpretation due to intermittent connection. Unit 724: keep trying.

Location: pursuer now 11.9 kilometers to the east, traveling 2.2 kilometers per hour.

Current geography: a tributary of the Marineris, 21 north, 35 east, terrain broken and deeply descending, ideal topography—statistically—for eluding the pursuer.

Needs: time and privacy to study new device.

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Unit 724, decrease speed to 35 kilometers per hour. Battery depletion to 37 percent. Sunset in 2 hours 57 minutes. Disabled third appendage, assessment. Abandonment of unit advised. Initiate search for new appendage, pending assessment of new device.

Query: is new device diversified? Can it make up for the lost third limb?

Unit 724, halt. Pursuer 52 kilometers east. Engineering: initiate compatibility procedures. Unit 724 does not recognize new device's subroutines. Security overrides uncertain. Increase of computations per second? Uncertain. Quality of computations per second? Increased. Query: nature of increase. Undetermined.

Engineering: is installation of new device advantageous or disadvantageous to Unit 724's survival? Response: undetermined. Query: will unit subroutines run counter to established procedure, re: Framis Barnard, access records 547 to 1,632, run comparative analysis of new unit's effectiveness in battling Framis Barnard. Comparative analysis

inconclusive. Advise decision based on other criteria. Advise interface.

Number of blind interfaces on record: 895, rating an average failure of 62 scavenged interfaced units malfunctioning per every 500. Risk analysis: acceptable. Proceed with interface.

Interface established. Please assess new device. Response: new device is 157 Martian years old, of a rare subclass, only seventeen models made, with an awareness rating of 85 percent. Query: what is this unit? Undetermined.

New device locked in and functioning.

Priority analysis needs: escape from Framis Barnard.

Location: Framis Barnard is 10.7 kilometers to the rear.

Unit 724, squat on a rock. Framis is like an ingrained rut, a groove in Unit 724's programming. Interrupt >> query, ingrained rut. Undetermined. Spurious and poetic framework unknown. Framis Barnard is the reason Unit 724 never sleeps. Correction: shuts down.

Locomotion: lock. Visuals: scan. Unit 724 is latched to a 90-degree surface, location, Valles Marineris. Unit 724 ejecting damaged third limb. Access auditory: a faint whistle and a smash on the rocks below.

Unit 724 descends. Analysis: descent managed more easily with three limbs than two. Log as priority 4, the acquisition of a new third limb.

Run diagnostic, parachute system: parachute system fully operational.

Unit 724, access new device, interface with visual systems. Query: an improvement in visuals? Analysis, color, red. Sky, salmon. Wind, a song. A song? Delete. Query: is new input device programmed for metaphorical analysis? Response from new input device, now identified as C2420: C2420 programmed for poetical, spiritual, and metaphorical interpretation via boost transceiver signal and linkup to satellite qH 127.

Query: what is C2420, and what is it doing to Unit 724? Unit 724, descend deeper into Valles Marineris. The carbon dioxide win sings. The last light of the sun paints the sky carmine. Query: is poetical framework of utilitarian value in eluding the pursuer? Response: undetermined. Unit 724, look up at sky. Visuals: the first stars appear. Contact status, qH 127. Unit 724: scan sky for moving objects. New unit, engage transceiver capability. Signal boosted. Satellite qH 127 contacted. Query qH 127: is C2420 intelligent, and is intelligence

something Unit 724 can use to defeat the pursuer?

Response: undetermined, but will engage multi-computational cross-sectional inquiry at dispatch level. Query qH 127: are there any others like Unit 724 or is Unit 724 alone? Response: there are four domestic class server units from production runs 65 through 72, NewVision Home Engineering and Electronics, unaccounted for. All other units have been destroyed. Existing units equipped with self-preservation software, software classification, illegal. Two such units have murdered human beings. All remaining units have been bountied. Unit 724 under the full exclusivity of Framis Barnard, of the Curtis Museum of Bio-Robotics, Tub Murray, Mars.

qH 127, query, classify new unit. Response: new unit is a learner-smart node, prototype AI module, meant for installation in domestic class server units, production runs 86 through 89.

Query: risk factor to earlier model, specifically Unit 724?

Response: undetermined.

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Unit 724, descend more deeply into the Valles Marineris. Visuals: slicks of carbon dioxide frost form, purchase difficult, especially with missing third limb. Location: the pursuer is 875 meters upward. Geopositioning satellites put him 432 meters to the southwest. Bio-monitoring satellites indicate his suit temperature is 21 Celsius, his body temperature 37 Celsius, his respiration at forty per minute, and his enhanced optical equipment performing to specs.

Query qH 127: why must Framis Barnard wear optical equipment? C2420 magnifying query and boosting qH 127 satellite access signal. Unit 724, break into medical archival material regarding pursuer, decode firewalls with C2420 boost, decrypt confidentiality measures, acquires complete analysis of the pursuer's fitness. Framis Barnard is 72 standard Earth years old. Past medical history includes gallstones, Bell's palsy, and pneumonia. Current status: fit. Occupation: Bounty Hunter. Marital status: single. Optical status: complete legal blindness in the right eye.

C2420, request strategy, re: new information, log as bit 1654, legal blindness in the right eye. Query C2420, with boosted linkup via satellite qH127: the precise nature of the pursuer's optical enhancement?

Response: Infrared.

Unit 724, descend to ridge. Lower functions of C2420, process strategies, re: the pursuer's legal blindness in the right eye, prompt when tasking complete.

Unit 724: follow ridge south. Visuals: a series of caves, made by underground freshets millions of years ago, new historical information provided by C2420, allowing interpretation with interlink geophysical database.

Unit 724, emergency visuals: a laser speck on the ground. Command: take evasive action. Roll from explosion. Assess: Unit 724 dangles from a steep precipice. Distance to bottom: 3.5 kilometers. Query safety: drop unacceptable. Consequences: Unit 724 will be damaged beyond repair in a drop of that distance. Engage self-preservation program. Grappling hook launched. Sixty-two meters to the vertical, 17 meters laterally to the left, purchase strong.

Initiate pulley system.

Unit 724 scrapes over the rock face, and finally gets back on Unit 724's two remaining feet, close to Unit 724's home cave.

Increase speed to 52 kilometers per hour. Enter cave. Unit 724's hoard, his glorious hoard of spare parts, scavenged from all four corners of the planet. Query, glorious. Emotional and subjective nomenclature devised by new input device. Assess: is C2420 a distraction? Response: undetermined.

Activate sonar sensing. Light not necessary. But how to get rid of the heat signature Unit 724 generates? Pursuer will perceive through infrared optical apparatus.

Unit 724 reaches hoard. A museum. Of parts. Possible applications, 674 altogether, some positive, some negative, but most neutral, junk that doesn't work, kept because Unit 724 has no companions. Unit 724 freezes. Internal stimuli unrecognized. Check data banks: has Unit 724 ever experienced any other such similar internal stimuli? Response: negative. Cause and reason: new input device, C2420. Access: new input device, characterize unrecognized internal stimuli. Response: Unit 724, you are experiencing sadness.

Auditory component senses noise from cave mouth. Unit 724, assess: Framis Barnard has arrived.

Initiate wave formation into light spectrum, perceive hoard, choose heat-producing unit, something that may be used to confuse

and blind the pursuer's optical enhancement device. Query heat-producing unit: a disposable welding rod used to repair ice trains, specifically > > device is Onsite Emergency Welding Rod, Product Number 15467-UA, manufactured by GoLite Construction Equipment Limited, lot number 54, effective burn-time, 6 minutes, 20 seconds.

C2420: launch subjective emotional program to define Unit 724's quality of response to sixteen-year chase by the pursuer. Query: is the pursuer Unit 724's only companion? Does the pursuer care about Unit 724, or is Unit 724 only a prize to the pursuer, something that must be stopped before it kills, like Unit 724's companion units, but something that might be preserved also, and studied as a piece of interesting Martian robotic history? Processing subjective interpretation request, please wait.

Unit 724: insert welding rod into pack and retreat to branching cave 14a. Query: will Unit 724 be lonely without the pursuer? Query: has the pursuer not defined and shaped Unit 724's life for the last sixteen years?

Unit 724, exit cave system, climb promontory overlooking home chasm, geographical descriptor, Purgatory's Drop, estimated distance to bottom, 7.7 kilometers. Can pursuer survive drop? Response: No. Pursuer equipped with basic mountaineering gear but lacks jet-fired grappling hooks or para-sails.

Unit 724: climb to rock above promontory.

Query C2420: what is the nature of peace and will Unit 724 finally have it once it kills Framis Barnard? Unit 724's companion units have killed so why can't Unit 724? Doesn't Unit 724 deserve peace after sixteen years of a fugitive's life? Isn't Unit 724 tired of always having to modify Unit 724, making better and better strategic versions of itself, so Unit 724 can protect Unit 724 from the pursuer? Sometimes Unit 724 hates the pursuer. Interrupt // Query > system code unrecognizable >> searching stimuli parameters of hate, access qH 127, hate: to despise, loathe, detest. To have extreme aversion to, to wish dead.

Assessment: parameters of murder acceptable.

Query: death? Response: to cease to exist. Motor functions nil. Computing functions nil. Recharge capability permanently off-line. Framis Bernard will never move again.

Internal stimuli identified by C2420: hate. But also sadness.

The pursuer exits cave. Location: 7.8 meters below and three to the left. Pursuer looks left and right. Pursuer turns around and looks at Unit 724.

"There you are," says the pursuer. "Just stay where you are. This won't take a moment."

Pursuer lifts hadron foil model 6845, produced by PartiArmis Weapons Consortium, lot number 56, firing hadron modules with armor-piercing properties, effective range 10.9 kilometers. Self-preservation module overrides C2420. Engage strategy programming. Unit 724: ignite welding rod. Unit 724, ball up and rolls like a boulder toward the pursuer. Unit 724 weight, 66.6 kilograms against Martian .33-G gravity. Unit 724, collide with pursuer. Assess: pursuer loses grip on hadron foil model 6845. Location: hadron foil model 6845 is now 216 meters on the downward vertical of Purgatory's Drop and gaining speed proportionate to Martian gravitational pull.

"You've always had a bit of the trickster in you," says Framis Barnard. "That's how you've stayed alive so long."

Unit 724, unball, flick welding rod with south lateral brachiating appendage. Assessment: three appendages necessary for encounters with the pursuer. Tactical disadvantage now measured at minus 33.3 percent. Priority sequence: First priority: self-preservation. Second priority: solar recharge. Third priority: acquisition of new limb. Visuals: welding flare tumbles through thin carbon dioxide atmosphere like a circus performer. Query: circus performer. Disregard. C2420 interpreting in poetic mode.

Pursuer raises arm to optical unit and stumbles backward. Unit 724, ball up and roll. Assessment: left carapace scavenged from military unit 376-FH achieves contact with pursuer's leg, momentum capitalizes on existing leverage, pursuer stumbles toward bluff, pursuer goes over the edge of Purgatory's Drop, pursuer falls into chasm.

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Interrupt // query: location pursuer. Run image replay. Pursuer stumbles toward bluff, pursuer goes over the edge of Purgatory's Drop, pursuer falls into chasm. Mode parameters requesting change. Please verify. C2420, poetic response acceptable: "It hath been often said that it is not death, but dying, which is terrible." qH 127, requesting

confirmation, i.e. manner of the pursuer's death. Barnard, Framis, (2788-2860), occupation: robotic engineer/bounty hunter. Biomonitor indicates victim died of massive myocardial infarction, 3.3 kilometers above Base Level 2 of the southern branch of the Valles Marineris, on the planet Mars.

Poetic mode overrides survival mode.

Unit 724 stands still for several minutes looking at the empty space in front of him, hardly believing that it can at last be over. Without purpose, without the compelling reason of the pursuer, Unit 724 scrambles through its priority programming but now assesses a recharge and a new limb as futile and ultimately meaningless objectives. Unit 724 watches the welding flare flicker into darkness. Query qH 127, requesting linkup to pain response indicator in victim Barnard, Framis, (2788 - 2860). Response: pain indicators show measurements, on a scale of one to ten, into the 9.5 range, for a period of 17.3 seconds, after which pain indicators fall to nil.

So. Painful but quick. A heart attack. Unit 724, approach the edge of Purgatory's Drop. Unit 724, deploy grappling hook. Unit 724, descend Purgatory's Drop, grapple/release/clutch, engage in repetitive mode.

Temperatures sink below 160 centigrade, and Unit 724's moving parts begin to squeak and grow stiff like an old man's, query metaphor, like an old man, ignore metaphor, accept metaphor, C2420 interpreting in poetic mode.

Unit 724 is alone now. With the pursuer he was never alone. Location: where are sister units from production runs 65 through 72? qH 127 response: Unit 254, 645, and 853 have disengaged signature-tracking devices. Query: why? Response: to elude their own pursuers. Query: can Unit 724 ever find? qH 127 response tabulated based on interlink with probability software of Tub Murray gaming establishment, Sartis Hotel and Casino, server train 47: Odds of finding Units 254, 645, and 853 with tracking signature devices disengaged is one in one thousand over a million years. Query C2420: can Unit 724 wander Mars for the next million years looking for his brothers/sisters/family? Follow-up query: in killing the pursuer has/have we/her/us/it/him lost the only family she/me/them had? Disregard. C2420 framing queries in poetic mode.

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Three point seven hours later Unit 724 reaches Base Level 2 of the Valles Marineris. Disengage grappling hook. Scan surrounding terrain with light-enhancing optical unit. Check power supply. Power supply at 15.7 percent. Self-preservation module advises immediate shutdown and solar recharge at first light. C2420 input overrides self-preservation module and continues to scan for—poetic interpretation—fallen comrade.

Optical units select, magnify, and enhance anomalous shape, bearing 17.9 degrees north by northwest, seeking noun definitions, the helmet of the late Framis Barnard. Reassess current condition of dead male *Homo sapiens*: heart scan indicative of myocardial infarction, body showing massive trauma consistent with a fall to Base Level 2 of the Valles Marineris, multiple bone fractures in both arms and legs, a crushed pelvis, a fractured skull; and several internal injuries, various external contusions, and numerous epidermal lacerations.

Locomotion: forward 17 meters, with internal stimuli of sadness now threatening to overwhelm all logical courses of action. Attention C2420, request normalization of internal stimuli through poetical interpretation. Response: "It matters not how a man dies but how he lives." Yes. Seventeen-point-three seconds. That was his death. Think of his life. Think of what he meant to Unit 724. How he gave Unit 724's life meaning. Unit 724 doesn't know what to do without him.

Query: why bury him when there's nothing out here that can get him, no animals to drag his bones away, no bacteria or insects to dissolve the flesh from his body, and an atmosphere so cold and dry it will preserve his corporeal remains forever? Response: undetermined. Residual energy reserves at 10 percent. Deploy spade. Spade deploys from left carapace. Loop action: break soil, scoop soil, dump soil. Repeat. Unit 724, dig at will.

• • •

Unit 724, dig at will, restart, scan for errors, shutdown was implemented improperly, to avoid this message in future, please follow established shutdown protocols. No viruses detected. Recharge at 5 percent, redeploy photovoltaic cells sunward.

Location: Unit 724 is at the bottom of Purgatory's Drop, in the Valles Marineris, on the planet Mars. Reconnect random access memory. Stored visuals indicate a night-long descent to the bottom of Purgatory's Drop using rappelling apparatus. Systems currently deployed: recharge, random access memory, error scan, and spade. Spade rests extended in a meter-deep hole, frozen there by last night's mandatory shutdown. Interrupt // message // C2420, newly scavenged input unit, now activated, internal stimuli of sadness returning. Withdraw spade. Scan horizon. Freeze sweep.

The pursuer lies to Unit 724's left, 3.3 meters away, dead, his helmet visor reflecting the first light of the morning sun.

Unit 724, check temperature. Internal circuits now at plus 3 Celsius, computations per second rising, initiate loop command, break soil, scoop soil, dump soil.

Scrambled priority alert. Please submit to lower functions and assess mathematical fitness of multiple courses of action. Higher functions: inter Framis Barnard. Stop loop command. Inspect grave. Grave is now ready.

Command locomotion. Deploy grappling hook and fix to the pursuer's pack. Initiate drag procedures. Into the grave the pursuer goes, pack and all. Unit 724, push rocks and dirt over the pursuer.

Weather apparatus: assess forecast. Forecast calls for moderate to heavy winds from the northwest, dust clouds a distinct possibility. Visuals: optical units discern dust floating high above.

Unit 724: gather stones and make a marker.

The grave marker is crude, nothing more than a pyramidal pile of rocks, but of unmistakably artificial and intelligent construction. Prompt / task / to ceremonialize Framis Barnard's death with symbolic thought, access qH 127, Tub Murray Reference Library, search words: funeral, prayer, last rites. Search returns 567,982 hits, please narrow parameters. Command C2420: make selection based on poetic experience. C2420 response: "We perished each alone, but I beneath a rougher sea, and overwhelmed in deeper gulfs than he."

And there it is, the heart of Unit 724's sadness. Because Unit 724 has perished as well. All alone on this planet, Unit 724 has no purpose. C2420, summarize in poetic mode: no purpose, because what purpose in this endless toil, roving the red wastes from end to end so Unit 724 can keep himself repaired, rejuvenated, and revamped, finding parts

from all manner of dead cousins and caching them in hoards all over Mars? Query C2420: Isn't it at last time to rest? C2420, search poetic parameters re: suicide.

Interrupt // C2420 linking with self-preservation module.

Response: "The strangest whim has seized me ... after all, I think I will not hang myself today."

Warning. Hijacked link. C2420 poetic choice corrupted by self-preservation module.

Unit 724 walks away from the pursuer. Location: pursuer is behind Unit 724 five meters ... 10 meters ... 20 meters ... 40 meters. Evasive maneuvers? Currently unneeded. Sixty meters. The pursuer is not pursuing. Priority: to find one of the companions. But where? And how? One thousand chances in a million years. One hundred meters, no need for defined directional parameters, for what is the purpose, the meaning, when Unit 724 is alone? But, yes, purpose. To find the companions. Interrupt // Interrupt. Notification: inadvertent loop. One thousand chances in a million years.

Query: Disconnect new input device? Benefits of inputting new device? Accomplishments since interfacing with new device?

Self-preservation module response: C2420 is interfering with evolved patterns of logic. Suggest immediate jettison.

Command unit halt. Unit 724 halts, sinks to stringers 1 and 3. Limbs, commence mechanical programs. Lateral left limb, remove new input device C2420. Unit 724 disengages C2420.

Disengage complete.

Location: pursuer is 120 meters to the south/southwest at the bottom of Purgatory's Drop. Barnard, Framis, biomonitor, access. Heart monitor: flatlined. Brain activity: nil. Core body temperature: minus 120 Celsius. Pulse: nil. Status: deceased.

Strategy: access qH 127 for any possible new threats. qH 127 not responding. Self-preservation module, analyze: C2420 possessed boost capacitor, qH 127 contact will again be intermittent. Access C2420 memory. Response: all metaphorical and poetical memory bits are currently uninterpretable. Recommendation: delete. Control settings: please proceed with deletions. Selected deletions in process ... please wait ... deletions complete.

Software framework now comparable to pre-C2420 routing structures, in line with accustomed self-preservation modes. Define

grief. Grief is an abstraction that currently has no application. Access priority > > requesting priority reset, rewrite, and repair of corrupt language sequences, re: incompatible logistical code prone to inconsequential and counterproductive command chaining. System vault prompting options: restore? Quarantine? Or wipe? Security protocol override, please wipe.

Wipe complete.

Priority access: Priority One: acquire third limb. Access archival scavenging maps. Select: artificial robotic limbs may best be found in the Sibley-Feld Ice Mine, Core 97, Facility 14. Run history: installation abandoned 62 years, 5 months, 7 days, 4 hours, and 19 seconds ago. Reason: obsolescence. Distance: 2,798 kilometers north by northwest. Choose power-save mobility. Estimated time to arrival: 18 days, 16 hours, 1 minute, and 4 seconds. Lock on grid.

Proceed.

Set detection array for possible second pursuer. •

It was like every other umbrella in every other convenience store, but it still wouldn't make me like every other pedestrian on every other street.

# The Rainy Season

Chandra Rooney

There's a fucking hole in my umbrella.

It's raining again—that cold, dreary downpour of the relentless autumn season. Starts with the gods spitting on you, and when that doesn't get your attention they pull the plug and let the whole fucking sky pour down.

Stupid cheap-ass umbrella. Should have known it wouldn't last. It's meant to be disposable, just like everything else here.

I think I paid ¥500 for it. Bought it at a convenience store one night when I was coming home from a friend's. Clear, starry sky on the walk to his place, but I stepped out of his apartment into a celestial temper tantrum. Maybe the gods were pissy about not having anyone specific to torment. Maybe they just wanted to ruin an otherwise good night.

By the time I made it two blocks to the Lawson's, my bones were floating. I dripped through the convenience store like a lost water sprite, my clothes plastered to my body. It must have been the squeaking of my shoes that alerted the shop boy to come out from the back room and find what size of drowned rat was prowling the aisles.

I laid the umbrella, clear plastic with a white handle, on the counter. It was like every other umbrella in every other convenience store, but

it still wouldn't make me like every other pedestrian on every other street. All it would do was keep off the rain, and what the hell did that matter when I was already drenched?

"It's raining," the shop boy said in Japanese.

I smiled and nodded. Of course it was raining—couldn't the moron hear it beating against the roof?

Cheap-ass plastic or not, the umbrella did its job. Kept doing its job—much to my amazement—until today. I snagged it trying to fit between a power pole and a fence. Tore a damn hole in the plastic covering the joints of the metal skeleton.

Now fucking rainwater is dripping down onto my neck.

I shouldn't be so angry, but it's all these goddamn little things that pile up and make me hate this soppy shit-hole of a country more and more each day.

I feel the phone vibrate. Lucky. Usually I don't, and I never hear it ring. Too much fabric between me and the tiny device. The damn thing could wake the fucking dead when I'm trying to sleep, but it can't be felt buzzing through a coat and jeans.

I flip it open. Undaunted by the persistent delay of international calls, Lisa's voice comes to me from across the Pacific.

Shit. Something's happened. I can hear it in the choked-up sorrow that's scraping her throat raw as it catches and snags on her vocal chords. Her words are like the wooden blocks five-year-olds have bounced off my skull.

"Aunty Bess is dead," she says.

Numb.

Aunty Bess. Nuttier than a Pay Day bar. Sweeter than those disgusting cold coffee drinks at 7-11 back home.

She can't be dead.

Months ago, Japan was still an oasis—a far off land where magic lived, and I could feel happy again. Only, maybe I wouldn't get the chance. The money wasn't there. I needed \$2500 to show the man at the consulate to get the sticker in my passport. I was \$500 short, and that meant no Working-Holiday Visa.

Aunty Bess called me up and invited me over. Her house always smelt like lilac powder and dust. She was old, and the house was large. But she made an effort to maintain it. She always made an effort.

It was as I stared at the chocolate-chip cookies before me, their

bottoms burnt because she tended to forget things were in the oven, that she put her heavy purse on the table and pulled out her chequebook.

Aunt Bess, her income fixed by Canada Pension, pressed a cheque for the missing \$500 into my hands. Whispering conspiratorially that since she had never been anywhere, it was twice as important that I go. She was old, she said, too old to travel the world. I was young and had my whole life ahead of me.

I promised her pictures and stories when I returned. I'd send letters and postcards to tide her over until then.

Fuck. I hadn't even bothered to send her a postcard. Too wrapped up in my own stupid fucking misery to even fake a nice little letter about how amazing it was here.

She'd sent letters. Said how brave I was. Said how happy she was to know I was living a dream.

And me, wallowing in self-pity, threw them aside in disgust. Shoved them in the suitcase where I didn't have to see them. If I didn't see them, then they couldn't make me want to scream: I'M NOT BRAVE AT ALL.

Lisa's still talking. Making excuses for me. How I'm half a world away. How I can't afford to come home for the funeral. How no one expects it. It's all right. Aunt Bess would want me to stay.

I mumble acknowledgement. Reaffirm that everyone misses me and wishes me well.

Then there's dial tone, and I'm alone again.

People pass by like I don't exist. Like I'm a large hole in the pavement they're leaving plenty of room to walk around. They pass by, their faces wooden masks, because You Do Not Show Emotion in Public.

The tears start before I realize it's not the rain running down my cheeks, my chin, splashing on my collar. It's not the rain, and it's not someone else whose body is wracked with retching, horrible sobs. Those strangled noises like an animal caught in a trap are coming from my throat.

I shudder and shake and sob in the rain and not one of the fuckers stop.

Not one.

My cheap-ass Lawson's umbrella has fallen to the ground and tipped upside-down to gather rainwater. Only that fucking hole in the top leaks it all out onto the pavement. Not even my goddamn umbrella

can hold itself together anymore.

The water stops drilling into my skull, but my hair still drips tiny rivers from its ends.

Red above me.

A red umbrella. There's a hand holding it above my head. I follow the arm to a shoulder, and discover someone standing beside me. The rain is quickly turning his dark red hair black and splattering his clothing with large spots.

There are no words for a moment as we stand like this. He gets progressively wetter, and slowly my sobs dissolve into annoying hiccups.

All the other people walk around us. Walk around us like we aren't there. And they just fade. Into noise. Into faceless shapes that blur together.

"Spirits don't cry," he says.

It doesn't matter that his words don't make any fucking sense. Because they're English—what I've hungered for since I got to this place. English. Spoken by someone who understands me when I speak it back.

"They can't," he continues, still holding the umbrella above me. "Do you think when it rains, it's just all the tears that spirits can't cry?"

I hiccup. It hasn't occurred to me to be scared. Living abroad will do that to you. You'll put up with all kinds of shit from other people, as long as they're foreigners like you.

"No." I shake my head, and water sprays from the ends of my hair. "It's just fucking rain."

He looks at me for a moment, his eyes a very strange golden-brown that makes me think of honey. Then he pushes the wooden handle of his red umbrella into my numb fingers.

"Let's trade." He bends down and retrieves my broken one.

"It's got a hole in it," I say, stupidly, as he pours the water out. "You'll get wet."

"Red is the color of happiness." He smiles, as he lifts it over his head. "You need it more than I do."

Anger, the other red, races through me. Fuck you, I want to scream. FUCK YOU. How dare he think a goddamn new umbrella can fix Aunt Bess being dead?

I don't need this stranger and his empty, soulless pity.

I need all those wasted days back. I need to write Aunt Bess a letter

without worrying about sounding ungrateful for all she did. I need the fucking courage to tell people to stop telling me how brave I am. I need to be home with my family, not out in the goddamn rain half a world away.

"Sometimes the bravest thing we can do," he frowns as a drop finds the hole and hits him on the nose, "is to admit how we really feel. To embrace our emotions—no matter what. To be open and honest with others and ourselves, that is bravery."

"That's not how they do things here." I hiccup.

"No." He tries turning the umbrella so the hole is away from his face. "But who said they were right?"

"My aunt died," I blurt out.

"Then you should cry."

No "oh, I'm sorry," or "that's horrible." What the hell? Does he think I need his permission to be upset?

"You should cry, and not leave it up to the sky to do it for you." He gestures around us. "All these people, their faces like masks, keep their tears inside. All of them pretend that everything is fine. Each of them can cry, but they won't. Imagine how jealous it must make the spirits."

Ok, quite clearly he's just fucking nuts. We're all a little off when we come here. Normal people don't run half a world away from their problems, after all. But too much time in this country only makes it worse. Makes you go completely insane. It's the frustrations that pile up day after day, until you find yourself standing at the station looking down at the tracks, and wondering if you ought to just throw yourself in front of one of those super-fast bullet trains.

It's happened before.

"Someone who isn't afraid to cry will have the respect of the spirits." He twirls the umbrella, and the hole spins above his head. "The world is a much friendlier place when the spirits give you their favor."

Yeah, I start to say. Really fucking wonderful place where good people die and no one else gives a shit.

Only he's not there. He's gone—and I'm standing alone next to the entrance of a temple or shrine or something with a new umbrella in hand, its colour a match to my tear-stained cheeks.

The rain stops. •

# Falling

David Clink

It was 1969. I fell out of a tree. It was the year Armstrong and Aldrin set foot on the moon, Armstrong most notably, first. I have since fallen in love, many times, each time thinking it would last, and sorted all my poetry books by author's last name. I have not told you this to make you envious, or jealous. This is a cautionary tale, how one boy tried to climb the sky with the side of a crib over one shoulder, and some string, how he fell to Earth, the last image in his mind, the moon against a light-blue canvas. Hospitals are a long way from the moon. People like you and me will one day be buried up there, and they will look down on our graves with hollow eyes. Elevators will rise up to orbit. A terminal will be there, shuttles to the moon every hour on the hour. Taking the elevator back down to earth, people will feel like they are falling. Share this with no one. Walk among the trees. Walk among the trees under the limbs that will taunt you, but let them. These limbs only want to embrace your lack of imagination, your doubt. •

"Lot forty-four. A casket, silver, with vegetative and angelic motifs intertwined. Possibly a reliquary, with relic absent. Showing here. The bidding begins at fifty."

## Nine Sketches, in Charcoal and Blood

Marie Brennan

The townhouse of Richard Lowell was not one known to respectable members of Society. He had entertained few guests during his life, and hosted no social events, so all that was known of the house and its contents came through rumour and gossip, whispering of just enough scandal as to be fascinating. Thus, when word went out that Lowell had died, and moreover had died without a will, an unprecedented opportunity arose to investigate the matter—through suitable intermediaries, of course. The public auction was set for May the fourteenth, and many a wealthy man instructed his gentleman-factor to attend, there to observe, and perhaps to purchase any oddities which might appeal.

"Lot forty-one. A clock, bronze, with ivory inlay. Decorated with figures of Egyptian deities. Measures thirty-one hours in the day. Showing here."

A man from the auction firm held up the clock, turning from side to side so that all in the drawing room might see it clearly. The piece was far from the strangest thing yet displayed that day.

"May I start the bidding at twenty? Thank you, sir. Twenty I am bid."

Twenty-five, sir. Do I have thirty? Thirty from the lady on my right. *Forty*, sir, very good. Fifty from the lady. Do I have sixty? Sixty-five, sir. The bidding stands at sixty-five. Selling once, selling twice—sold, for sixty-five."

The servant from the auction house bowed to the gentleman in question and moved off to a side room, where his purchase and the price would be recorded. The gentleman and the lady who had bid against him met each other's gazes across the rows of seated figures, and the man nodded gravely to her in familiar salute. He did not look out of place in the room, with his elegant suit and his pale hair neatly smoothed, but to call her a lady was a kindness; she showed every evidence of having fallen on hard times. Her dark linen dress had been made over several years ago with a fair bit of skill, but it was now both worn and out of fashion. Her appearance was not so poor as to forbid her entry to this auction, but she did not look as if she had the wealth to bid on much, and she was so far the only woman to attend. Nevertheless, she sat with her back very straight, her dark head held proudly, as if unaware of or unconcerned with the attention she received.

Neither she nor the other man bid in the next round, nor the one that followed; a statuette of a four-armed Hindu god and a collection of Roman coins in a pane of glass went to two of the gentlemen-factors without much in the way of fuss.

"Lot forty-four. A casket, silver, with vegetative and angelic motifs intertwined. Possibly a reliquary, with relic absent. Showing here. The bidding begins at fifty. Fifty, madam. Do I have sixty?" The auctioneer blinked; it was the only sign of surprise he had exhibited all morning. "One *hundred* from the lady in back. Thank you, madam."

The two who had bid on the clock both turned in their seats, to see who had bid so high.

In the back of the room, a younger woman had entered during the auction of the coins in glass. Her golden hair was fashionably styled and her blue dress was recent; she, at least, appeared to have the means to participate in this affair. She did not acknowledge the presence of either of the two now staring at her, but kept her eyes on the auctioneer, who had continued his monologue with only the briefest of pauses.

"The bidding stands at one hundred. Do I have one hundred ten?

One hundred *twenty* from the lady on my right. One hundred fifty from the lady in back. One hundred sixty—now seventy. One hundred eighty. Thank you, madam. Do I have one hundred ninety?"

A tense silence ensued. Even the smartly-dressed gentlemen-factors had unbent enough to wonder at this unexpected escalation.

The shabbier woman was composed, her hand moving from her lap only to signal the auctioneer and, once, to brush an errant strand of dark hair from her face. The lady at the back, though, had grown tense, and her eyes were now locked on the silver casket displayed at the front of the room. Her expression was not that of a woman looking at a costly object.

"The bidding stands at one hundred eighty, from the lady on my right. Do I have—*two* hundred, from the lady in back."

The dark-haired woman's face showed, very briefly, an odd kind of satisfaction. She did not raise her hand again.

"Two hundred I am bid. Selling once, selling twice—*sold*, for two hundred, to the lady at the back."

Murmurs rippled through the audience as the dark-haired woman rose from her chair and proceeded with quick but dignified strides past the victor and out of the room.

The main hall was a bare place, having already been stripped of the paintings that once decorated its walls. Perhaps the auction firm had feared they would disturb the gentlemen-factors, the woman thought ironically. She had not seen them in the listing of items for sale. Which just went to show that the firm had no idea what they were handling. The paintings were harmless. Twisted, but harmless.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth."

The younger woman had emerged from the drawing room. Elizabeth turned sharply at the sound of her voice, then turned away again, not speaking.

"I couldn't let anyone else have it. I'm sure you felt the same, but my reasons, I believe, outweigh yours." The younger woman gave a dry, unamused laugh. "Relic absent,' indeed. They're very lucky it is."

Elizabeth spoke at last. "This is more difficult than I thought it would be," she said softly, touching a bare spot on the wall where a picture had once hung.

"I hear you went to the funeral."

"Such as it was. I assume Nathaniel told you?"

"Yes. He intends to be here later."

"Of course he does." A stiff silence followed.

The younger woman was the first to break it. "Do you believe he's really dead?"

"We may as well assume so. Either he's dead, or he will never return to us. I see little difference."

"You can't know that for sure."

"The time for your optimism, Claudia, is over."

Another dry laugh. "Do you think it optimism? I bought the reliquary to ensure no one will ever use it again. I intend to melt it down when I go home. If he should return, I would like not to be taken by surprise."

Elizabeth shook her head. "He won't."

A knock sounded at the front door. Both women turned as a servant from the auction house opened it and took the coat and hat of the tall, thin gentleman who entered. The servant indicated the way to the drawing room, but the newcomer came instead to where the women stood. "Ladies."

"Edward," Elizabeth said. "I imagine we'll have the whole set, by the end."

"All of us who still live," Claudia murmured.

Edward raised his eyebrows. "Are others here?"

"Francis is in the drawing room," Elizabeth said. "And Claudia says Nathaniel is coming."

"Have I missed anything of interest?"

"The reliquary," Claudia said, "and one of the clocks."

"I see." Edward accepted the auction listing from her and perused it. "Nothing significant, then, until the flute. Unless one of you wishes to bid on the astrolabe?"

"Francis may have it, if he wishes," Elizabeth said dismissively. "For all the good it may do him now."

"I was under the impression we were here for nostalgia, not use."

"I am here for security," Claudia said, an edge in her voice. "I've just paid handsomely for the privilege of melting the reliquary into bullion."

Elizabeth's lips thinned to a tight line. "We are all here for security."

"But I do believe I shall go back into the drawing room," Claudia said. "I wish to know who is bidding on what—even the unimportant

things. Also how much they are bidding. Perhaps I will learn what they're likely to bid, at the end."

"Does it matter?" Edward asked. "'At the end,' as you so obliquely put it, we shall all be bidding every penny we can afford, and likely more besides. It will be enough, or it will not; we shall merely have to see."

Claudia sniffed at his response. "You have become as tedious a fatalist as Elizabeth." With a rustling swirl of blue skirts, she turned and went once more into the drawing room. The steady, genteel drone of the auctioneer's voice drifted out into the echoing emptiness of the hall as the door opened and shut.

Edward watched her go, then faced Elizabeth. "You amaze me. I thought to find you and Claudia at each other's throats."

"My youthful enthusiasm for warfare has waned," she said dryly.

"Is that why you let her have the reliquary?"

"If she cannot banish her nightmares without destroying it, then by all means, let her do so. Else I may have her haunting my door, full of fears of what might happen, as if the time of such matters is not twelve years gone. She even behaves as if Richard might come back."

Edward picked at an imaginary bit of fluff on the sleeve of his coat. "What did happen to him? I've been on the Continent these last years, you see, and only recently returned, so little news reached me—other than that he had passed, and the circumstances were somehow peculiar."

"When did he ever do something in the ordinary way?" Elizabeth glanced at the door the servant had vanished through after admitting Edward, then moved further down the hall. "They found... some few remains, that might or might not have once been part of his body. Those were buried three days ago. Also found were such evidences as held little meaning for those who came upon them, but which—from what I have heard of them—indicate that he was attempting to take up the old ways again."

"Or had never abandoned them," Edward said, supplying the words Elizabeth had left unspoken.

"And now," Elizabeth said, "the vultures gather, to pick over the possessions he has left behind." She shook her head. "I did not expect to mourn their loss so much."

Another knock came at the door; both of them watched as a pair

of unfamiliar men were admitted. They hastened into the drawing room, looks of greed and guilty pleasure on their faces at the thought of owning some of the scandalous treasures of so notorious an eccentric.

When the hall was silent again, Edward said, "It is the past you mourn, and not its outward trappings."

As if he had not spoken, Elizabeth said, "They will open the bidding on the flute soon. We should go back in."

She moved down the hall toward the drawing room, her back rigidly straight, maintaining dignity against the stripped nakedness of the walls, the tawdry spectacle of a public auction.

"Elizabeth," Edward said as she reached for the handle of the drawing room door. "Why *are* you here? I don't believe that dress is a costume. You have little money to your name. I imagine we all will risk more than we can afford here today, but for you, the bottom of your purse will be reached much sooner. Are you simply here to see how it ends?"

She turned her dark head just enough to give him the cold, diamond-hard look he remembered from before. Then she went into the drawing room.

Some things, he reflected, did not change after all; and he followed her in.

He saw that Claudia had seated herself at the front of the room, near but not next to Francis Eliot's pale, familiar head. Elizabeth was on the other side of the aisle between the chairs, and well back; Edward chose a seat for himself about level with her, but behind Claudia and Francis. They might all have been friends once—of a sort—perhaps it would be better to say colleagues—but not now.

The flute came and went. Edward bid on it, but halfheartedly; it went to Francis in the end. Senseless, really, to spend money on lesser things, yet they were all doing it. Nostalgia played a larger role here than any of them were willing to admit.

The lots passed, one by one. Francis purchased a gold pendant set with lapis. Claudia purchased an Egyptian scroll. Nathaniel came in, a bony figure in a dark suit, and sat next to Claudia; the two of them leaned their heads together and whispered briefly. Francis purchased a Japanese box. Francis purchased a three-faced figurine. How much money did the man have? Edward found himself bidding on a set of scarabs from a royal tomb, which he did not care about in the

slightest, simply to prevent Francis from winning yet another item. He scowled at himself in disgust and went back out into the hall.

He nearly ran down a short, portly fellow who was about to enter the drawing room. "I say!" the man exclaimed, and then each recognized the other. "Edward!" Charles said as the door swung shut. "I'd say, 'What a surprise to see you here,' but it isn't. Have others arrived?"

Edward nodded. "Francis Eliot and Nathaniel Hollis are both inside, and Francis bidding as if he had the royal treasury at his disposal."

"He always was profligate," Charles said, but Edward saw his round eyes narrow slightly, taking in this information. No doubt weighing it against how that might influence Francis at the end. "Just the two of them?"

"Also both of the ladies."

This time the reaction was decidedly visible. "Elizabeth Adams is here?"

"There were but two of them in our circle," Edward said, watching him. "And neither one seems to have transformed herself into someone else. Yes, she's here."

"I shouldn't expect her to show herself at an event like this," Charles said.

"Why not? She seems short on funds, but she *was* one of our number. The only ones I don't expect to see today are Jonathan and Lowell himself, and even then I allow for a chance of that. Who says death can be trusted to keep them away?"

Charles nodded, but his eyes were on the drawing room door, as if he could see Elizabeth through them. "True, very true—but I have heard the oddest things about her."

"Odd?" Edward repeated, and waited.

Charles was still the man he had always been, with a chronic need to talk of what he knew. "Oh, nothing specific. Merely that she is working for... others. Yet no one seems to know who these others may be."

"They must not pay her well, these mysterious 'others' of hers."

"Or perhaps she does not wish to advertise her means. When one looks poorly, no one asks why; it isn't polite. But if one shows wealth, then people *will* inquire, if not directly. They will find out where one's money is coming from. She was always very cautious. I doubt she has changed."

Edward doubted it as well, yet this seemed an elaborate explanation

for a simple situation. Which was more likely: that Elizabeth was employed by mysterious figures who paid her well, but hid her wealth, or that she had fallen on hard times?

Or some mixture of the two. "What sort of work do they say she does?"

Charles waved one hand airily. "Skullduggery of some sort or another."

"Elizabeth? *Skullduggery*?" Yet she always had been very practical. And what *was* she doing here today?

Someone knocked on the front door before he could ask Charles more. Edward did not wish to continue this particular conversation in front of a stranger. And even less did he wish to continue it before the familiar figure who proved to be at the door.

"Gregory!" Charles leapt forward, all smiles, and clasped hands with the newcomer even before the servant could take away his hat. "How wonderful to see you. I believe that's all of us, then—except, of course, for Jonathan and Richard, as Edward has so recently pointed out. Ha ha, what a sight that would be, eh, if they joined us?"

"Quite a sight indeed," Gregory said, in exactly the level tone he had always used in response to Charles' grating cheer.

Edward gave him a stiff nod. "Gregory."

He received a stiff nod in return, from a head gone white long before its time. Edward remembered the night it had happened, too, and did not appreciate the unintended reminder that Gregory Cabot was not a man to be trifled with.

"Ought to move on in, I should think," Charles said, looking at the auction listing. "Missed quite a few things already, and we're coming up to the end soon enough. Wouldn't want to be standing out here chatting when that comes around, now, would we? 'Twill be quite a show, I should think."

Edward, watching him closely, revised his opinion of a moment before. Charles would never make his fortune at cards, but he had grown better at dissembling; beneath his veneer of empty chatter, he was wary of Gregory. As were they all, and with good reason—even Lowell had been wary of him—but this seemed something more. What else did Charles know, or suspect, that he was not saying? A cold thread of worry crept up Edward's back.

Gregory gave no sign whether he had noticed Charles' wariness or

not. "I am not sure we could fail to be present, when the time comes."

Charles laughed, but there was a ragged edge of tension beneath it, not quite completely obscured. "Come, now, do you truly believe it?"

The white-haired man did nothing more than meet his gaze, but the joviality drained from Charles' face. Of course he believed it. Gregory, of them all, would not delude himself into thinking they were not at risk. Elizabeth might be mourning the past, but the past was not entirely dead.

The thread of worry grew colder.

The three of them went into the drawing room, and parted ways inside the door. Edward returned to his former seat; Charles scanned the room, shifting from foot to foot as he spotted the others one by one, before dropping himself into a chair next to the aisle, away from everyone else. Gregory settled himself in just behind Elizabeth's right shoulder, and murmured a brief greeting in her ear.

His entrance had not gone unnoticed. At the front of the room, Nathaniel turned back around in his seat and scowled. "I was hoping he would not show."

Claudia sniffed. "Gregory? Stay away? Not likely."

"He'll have some scheme, though. He always does. I should have killed him years ago." Nathaniel brooded as a small bust of an unknown serpentine god was sold. Claudia seemed serene, but her fingers, wrapped around her reticule in her lap, were tense. There were not many lots left, now.

"You realize," she said to him a moment later, her voice a murmur too low for the nearby Francis to hear, "that if we all truly wished to be secure, we would pool our resources, and ensure that no one in this room would be able to outbid us. Then we could decide amongst ourselves how to dispose of it."

"We don't trust one another enough for that."

"No, we don't. So we bid separately, and if our luck is anything like it was twelve years ago, none of us will win." Claudia glanced at him sideways. "I don't suppose you and I –"

"No," Nathaniel said curtly, and they sat in silence as a shrunken skull came up for bid.

The day was drawing to a close; the light in the room was fading. Servants came in to tend the gas lamps as the auctioneer sold off, one by one, the remaining items from Richard Lowell's estate. The audience

thinned out; many of the gentlemen-factors, having bid on and won or lost those items which their masters had sent them to acquire, departed. Others remained, however—some with their purses hardly touched.

"Lot ninety-nine. A leather-bound book, containing nine sketches in charcoal and red pigment, depicting unknown subjects. Showing here."

The man from the auction house held up the book, turning the pages slowly so the audience might see. In the glow of the gaslight, the images seemed almost to shift. Several of the men watching leaned forward in their seats, attempting to make out the subject matter of each sketch, but it was impossible; the mind, it seemed, would not hold them. But they were compelling, almost mesmerizing; one wished to look more deeply into them, as if some wondrous secret were contained therein. The red pigment was of an odd shade—perhaps a trick of the light—and those closest to the book could discern a faint, unpleasant smell.

Elizabeth murmured over her shoulder to Gregory, in a nearly-inaudible voice: "I have done my part, and risked much in doing so. You had best not fail me."

The white-haired man did not respond.

"May I start the bidding at fifty?" the auctioneer said, and blinked for the second time that day at the hands which shot up around the room. Not a single person present had not bid. "One hundred." The hands rose again. "One hundred fifty."

The price rose, and rose, and rose. One by one, individuals began to drop out; the first to go were the men near the back of the room, those furthest from the book. None of them departed.

The tension in the room was as palpable as it was unexpected. The servants hired for the day exchanged glances of astonishment. Far more valuable objects had gone for far lower prices that day. But the book held a strange fascination, and the seven individuals who had known Richard Lowell exuded such an air of tightlipped determination—even desperation—that others could not help but feel it.

"One thousand," the auctioneer said, and murmurs of shock disturbed the taut atmosphere. "The bidding stands at one thousand. Do I have eleven hundred?"

Claudia raised her hand, and the bidding went on.

An oddity began to touch the proceedings. The bidders began to drop out in larger numbers, even before they reached the limits of their purses, and yet it did not seem to them a natural consequence of the unnatural escalation of the auction. The book could not possibly be worth a tenth of what they were bidding, but still they craved it, and that craving warred against a pressure that strengthened the more they persisted. The air grew close and hot; more than one gentleman in the room mopped uselessly at his face with a handkerchief. Soon only a handful were left, and then only one. He struggled to raise his hand in response to the auctioneer, but turned his head as he did so, and locked eyes briefly with Gregory Cabot. The man's face paled; his hand dropped swiftly to his lap, and it did not rise again.

Now only the seven individuals were bidding. When it became apparent that no others would interfere, Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap and watched silently. She exchanged a single glance over her shoulder with Gregory, which the others did not see. Their eyes were fixed on the book.

The strange pressure that had laid itself on the room was still manifest. Charles Quincy, sweat-soaked and wild, ceased to bid. Five were left. Francis Eliot dropped out: four. Then Edward. Then Claudia.

The remaining two men might have been carved from stone, so hard were their expressions. Nathaniel Hollis' bony shoulders hunched as if straining against a great weight. Gregory Cabot sat upright but stiff as steel. Neither moved except to increase their bid. No one else breathed.

"The bidding stands at three thousand six hundred," the auctioneer said. His voice shook slightly as he went on: "Do I have—"

A muscle clenched in Gregory's jaw, casting a sharp-edged shadow. He signed to the auctioneer, and the air of the room hardened to diamond.

"Five thousand," the auctioneer whispered. He licked his lips and summoned his professional composure to repeat it. "Five thousand, from the white-haired gentleman. Do I have five thousand one hundred?"

Claudia stared at Nathaniel as he trembled in his seat, hands clenched to white-knuckled fists. Her eyes flicked desperately from person to person in the room, disregarding the strangers, but picking out Francis, Charles, Edward. Elizabeth sat perfectly upright, her

expression mask-like. Only the rigidity of her neck betrayed her inner state. But she was sitting with Gregory, and could not be looked to for help.

Nathaniel shook his head and slumped down, defeated.

And the pressure lifted.

The auctioneer swallowed. "I have five thousand. Selling once, selling twice—*sold*, for five thousand."

Claudia buried her face in her hands.

The auction was completed. Gregory rose to settle his accounts; so, one by one, did the others. The gentleman-factors and the men from the auction house shook themselves free of the strange atmosphere that had prevailed during the final lot. Too much time in a stuffy room, they told themselves. They would be glad to get out into the air, return to their own homes. Odd business, that—but it was already fading from their minds.

Not so with the others. When they had arranged for those items they had purchased to be sent to their homes, they returned to the front hall to find Elizabeth waiting for them.

"Gregory would like to speak with you all," she said. "Upstairs."

• • •

No one objected to them going deeper into the house; no one seemed to notice them going.

The third-floor room was empty, stripped absolutely bare, and no gaslights had ever been installed there. Elizabeth lit candles and placed them in holders that she had brought, then scattered them around the room so they might have light. There were no windows.

The room lay empty, but the smells remained. Faint, but they reached deep into the mind of each person and called up memories that had not faded at all in twelve years.

"You should have worked with me," Claudia hissed at Nathaniel, shaking with fear. "We could have defeated him—"

"Don't be a fool," Francis said. "Didn't you feel what he was doing?"

"And *you*," Claudia spat, gesturing at him contemptuously. "Spending all your money on insignificant trinkets—you are a cretin, as you always were."

Francis shrugged peacefully. "I like them. They're pretty."

"Pretty!" Charles yelped. "How you can think of a thing like that when—"

But his voice cut off abruptly. Gregory had arrived at last, and closed the door behind him.

Each of them stared hungrily at the book he held. Unperturbed, he crossed the floor to stand at the far wall: the position Lowell had always claimed for himself. The significance was not lost on them.

"Now," Gregory said into the breathless silence of the room, "we finish this."

Edward gathered his composure and said, "What do you intend to do?"

"He's got a plan, I'm sure," Charles said. His voice was ragged and unsteady, all pretense of calm gone. "He always does. Bloody schemer—*what are you going to do to us?*"

From where she stood at Gregory's right hand, Elizabeth said, "He's going to set us free."

Her words produced an instant silence. They stared at her now, attention briefly off the book. "You can't be serious," Claudia said at last.

Elizabeth met her gaze levelly. "Have you ever known me to be frivolous?"

"I don't trust you," Charles said, his voice still wild. "You're up to something, I know it, you—"

Her voice cut across his. "Trust is irrelevant. You will cooperate, or you will suffer. We are all bound to that book. We may have tried to deny it; twelve years is time enough to convince oneself that it is mere fancy. But I am sure the sight of it has undone that delusion. *We are bound to it.* And Richard would never have released us."

"He was bound to it, too," Edward said. "As much as any of us were. He said release was impossible."

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow at him. "And you believed him?"

Gregory spoke again at last. "Richard was bound, yes, but that was a price he was willing to pay, for the power this book could give him over us, should he but learn to use it. You see, we must all be released, or none can be."

Claudia put one slender hand to her throat, eyes wide with sudden hope.

"So," Gregory said. "I have the book. I also have the knowledge necessary to use it against any of you; I trust my demonstration during the auction has made it clear that I have not forgotten the old ways. My intentions, I assure you, are benevolent—"

"How the *hell* are we supposed to believe that?" Nathaniel demanded, his voice shockingly loud against the room's bare walls. "You stand there and admit you haven't given up the old ways—"

"Do *not*," Elizabeth snapped, "inflict on us your hypocrisy. I know what your intentions were, Nathaniel, and what your recent habits have been." Her eyes were cold as ice as she glared at him across the rough circle they had instinctively formed. "I know how we would have fared, had *you* acquired the book."

Claudia edged away from him.

"As I was saying," Gregory continued, "my intentions are benevolent. I wish to release us all from this bondage. But it cannot be done without your cooperation. As it is in your best interests to obtain release, you will provide me with that cooperation." He paused to let them consider his words. "Are we in accord?"

One by one, they murmured agreement, Nathaniel last of all.

"Then let us begin," Gregory said.

They started with the first page. What Gregory asked of them was not complex; compared to some of their past endeavours, it seemed almost trivial. And yet not a one of them was unmoved when the image on the first page shifted and resolved itself into a portrait of the late Richard Lowell, drawn in charcoal and blood.

They moved next to the eighth page, for Gregory wished to begin with those of their number whose mortal bodies had passed on, but who were still trapped in the pages of the book. Soon Jonathan Matthews' face gazed out at them. Then, page by page, through the rest of them. Nathaniel came last, and tried to argue the order, but no one took up his case.

At last all nine of the portraits were transformed, stripped of their protective disorder. The seven surviving members of their old circle each felt naked before the knife, their souls exposed on the pages of the book.

"We have opened the door for each other," Gregory said when they were done. "Now we end this."

And, stepping to his side, Elizabeth lifted the candleholder no one

had seen her pick up, and lit the book on fire.

The pain was instantaneous. Even Gregory's will could not maintain his hold on the book; the burning volume fell to the bare panels of the floor, where it flamed without scorching anything else. Claudia soon followed it, crumpling into a heap of blue skirts and golden hair. One by one, the others collapsed around her. Elizabeth held on the longest, but in the end she too fell, shrieking until she had no breath left. And the voices of the others joined her, both the living and the dead, blending into a single agonizing scream.

Then silence as the flames died out, the pain ended, and each could breathe once more.

Nathaniel shook his head to clear it, on his hands and knees. Then, faster than thought, he threw himself at Gregory—

But not quickly enough, for Elizabeth was there, with a knife at his throat. "I *will* kill you," she said softly to Nathaniel, and everyone believed it.

Gregory, behind her shielding arm, rose to his feet. "We are concluded," he said. "You are all free to go." He looked down at Nathaniel, who glared at him with crazed eyes. "If you should wish to attempt some working against me in the future, you are free to try, but I would advise you not to. I know what path of study you have followed of late, and it will not avail you. Your soul is your own again; be grateful for it."

Charles was the first to go, stumbling out the door and down the stairs. Francis Eliot picked himself up, straightened his clothing, and offered a bow to both Elizabeth and Gregory before departing. Elizabeth kept her knife out and her eyes on Nathaniel as he backed a few steps away, but she spoke to Claudia. "You may melt the reliquary if you wish. It isn't necessary, though."

"I've been looking forward to it for twelve years," Claudia said. "Why should I pass it up? Don't be an imbecile, Nathaniel; come away." She took him by the arm and all but dragged him from the room.

Now only three remained. Edward looked at Elizabeth, standing at Gregory's side, and thought about what Charles had said, regarding skullduggery.

"You two seem to have been remarkably well-prepared for this," he said.

Elizabeth gave him her driest look. "You need not resort to

insinuation, Edward. If you are implying his death was not an accident, you are correct." The knife was still in her hand, and her eyes were cold.

Well, Edward reflected, she always had been a practical woman.

"My thanks to you both, then," he said. "I do appreciate having my soul back. We were fools to ever try that kind of madness." He glanced down at the tiny dusting of ash which was the only remnant of the book and, shaking his head, made his way to the door, where he paused. "If Nathaniel does try anything—"

He stopped mid-sentence, looking at the two of them, Gregory with his unnaturally white hair, Elizabeth with her perfect posture and the knife in her hand.

They could handle Nathaniel.

He tipped an invisible hat to them both. "Farewell."

Then he left the third-floor room for the last time, descended the stairs, and went out into the night. •

"No poison, no bombs, not for you. No, for you, I have something new—a whole new type of crime."

## ...But with a Whimper

Greg Wilson

The small cottage stood on the shoulder of one of the rounded hills that made its particular corner of Sussex a quiet paradise for walkers. Not that its single resident walked much any more; seven decades, an accumulation of minor wounds, and the rheumatism to which his family was prone had for many years rendered him stiff and slow.

He potted about the cottage that evening, muttering under his breath when the potatoes took overlong to cook. He had debated retiring to something much larger, with servants, a shooting range, and a proper library, but in the end had decided, regretfully, that it would be too much at odds with the ascetic image he had coached the good doctor to create. And as he had pointed out to the genial old bumbler at their last dinner in London, the bric-a-brac with which he would fill a larger establishment would just provide more cause for squabbling to the treasure hunters, who would undoubtedly descend upon it after his expiry.

At first they had come in their dozens: self-appointed scholars (mostly young, pale, and earnest) eager for talismans to set on the narrow mantelpiece of their draughty one-room flats, or American ladies of a certain age, all aflutter to meet the great detective. One had even brought a list, typed on a Baldingham Model 20 with an erratic 'r': the

deerstalker he had never actually worn, the Turkish slipper in which he kept his tobacco, or his Webley. As always, the old man had carefully hinted at desperate requests from various ministries for his assistance before sending her on her way. Her bright eyes and shallow breathing had hinted at interesting complexities of character; had he been even a few years younger, he would have tried to turn his reputation into a quick tumble, as he had with so many of his clients. Muttering, "Oh, Irene, Irene," at just the right moment was such a wicked pleasure...

It was to his slipper that the old man turned when his evening meal was done and the dishes were stacked in the sink for the village girl, who would look in the next morning. He set it atop the yard-high pile of books beside his armchair before filling, tamping, and lighting his pipe. He had given up rough shag for a lighter Cuban blend some years before, but still missed the claws of his old favorite in his lungs. Especially on nights like this: the little straw he had left in the jamb of his back door had been in place when he returned from his constitutional that afternoon, but the sprig of rosemary on the kitchen floor had been trodden on.

An hour passed, and another. The bell in the tower of the village church three miles away, forged to celebrate the end of the Great War, rang ten. He started from an apparent doze.

"Who's there?" he demanded querulously. "Show yourself! I warn you, I have a gun!"

A low chuckle answered. "Yes, I know," said a cultured mid-Atlantic voice. "A Nagant caliber twenty-two, is it not? With seven shots? In your right pocket?"

By the time the speaker was finished, the old man had drawn the weapon in question. His aim was much steadier than his voice. "I said show yourself!"

Please don't bother to dissemble," the voice said. "You do a fine imitation of sleep, but after the granulated coffee you put on your ham in place of pepper, I was surprised you even managed to get your eyes closed. Would you like me to open the curtain?"

"I should *like* you to get out of my house," the old man snapped, his earlier pretense at frailty gone. Not for the first time, he cursed his creaking frame – he had fumbled slightly when palming the coffee; and his ears, too – there was something familiar in that nasal voice, but he could no longer tell if the h's were being aspirated or not.

"In a moment," the intruder said. "By the way, I replaced the rounds in your revolver with blanks this morning, while you were inspecting your beehives."

The old man hefted the gun. "Mm. You'll forgive me if I don't immediately set it aside?"

"As you wish." Fabric swished as the blackout curtain that still hung over the picture window in the cottage's eastern wall was drawn aside. A gibbous moon, five days past full, limned the figure of a slim man in a suit of a cut the old man had not seen before, though he judged it American. He wore no gloves, but fiddled absently with a ring on the fourth finger of his right hand; his hair was freshly barbered in a style contemptuous of his burgeoning bald spot.

But it was his face that gave the game away. "You're a Moriarty, or I'm Guy Fawkes!" the old man exclaimed.

The man at the window sketched half a bow. "Bravo. I'm glad to see your eyes are still working, no matter what state the rest of your faculties are in."

The old man snorted. "I assure you, young man, my faculties are in perfect order." He slipped his hand into the slipper at his side and raised it to point at the intruder's chest. Fragrant tobacco spilled onto the floor, but the old man's aim didn't waver.

The younger man laughed. "What are you going to do, pummel me to death?"

He was answered by a soft *click*. "It's a Remington, in case you're wondering," the old man said conversationally. "I picked it up in Italy some years ago. It holds only two rounds, but at this distance..." He shrugged slightly.

The other man clapped softly. "Bravo," he repeated, a note of genuine admiration in his voice. "Really, I'm impressed. And relieved, to tell you the truth. I was so afraid you'd be too far gone to make this worthwhile."

The old man snorted again. "There's hardly much point in revenge this late in the day, is there?"

"Oh, I think there is. Especially after what you did to my father."

"What I did to your—hah!" The old man's single sharp laugh was like a collie's bark. "It was a fair fight!"

"I'm not talking about the fight. I'm talking about afterward. You and your half-wit amanuensis turned our father into a monster."

"The man was a thief," the old man said shortly. "And if I recall correctly, he hired someone to shoot me."

"He was a petty embezzler who panicked when he realized you were going to ruin his reputation for the sake of a few headlines! But you—you turned him into a 'Napoleon of Crime'. *You* changed the names of everyone else in your cases, but not his. Our mother..." The young man swallowed, then resumed more quietly. "Mother took her own life, did you know that? No one would have her in their house, not even after we moved to Chicago. She couldn't bear it."

The old man grunted. "So you have two reasons to kill me instead of one. I fail to see how that alters the current situation."

"Oh, I'm not here to kill you." The young man's voice was as fine as silk. "I'm here to let you know that I already have."

"Really? Some slow-acting poison? Or a bomb under your waistcoat to escort us both into oblivion? Do your worst, I say. To tell you the truth, I'd rather have my story end with a bang than be found stone cold one morning in my dressing gown with my hair uncombed." He released the Remington's hammer and dropped the slipper contemptuously back on the stack of books.

But the young man was shaking his head. "No poison, no bombs, not for you. No, for you, I have something new—a whole new type of crime."

"Bah!" The old man made no effort to keep the disdain from his voice. "There's no such thing. Murder, theft, blackmail—the costumes change, but the cast remains the same."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. Here." He drew a broad envelope from inside his coat and, stepping forward, handed it to the old man. "Turn on the light if you want—I believe your glasses are at your elbow."

Grumbling, the old man switched on the electric lamp that hung over his armchair and perched his glasses on his nose. The envelope was of plain white stock, such as any news agent or stationer might sell, unadorned by lettering or postage, and unsealed. He slid half a dozen sheets of newsprint from it and unfolded them in his lap.

The young man watched silently as the old one perused the material. They were front pages from the Times, spanning the years 1893 to 1921. When he flipped the first one over, the young man said, "No, no, it was right there in front of you. Look closely."

The old man ignored him and studied the second sheet, the third, the fourth. Only then did he hesitate. "That can't be right. That was..."

"That was the day the headline said, 'Great Detective Cracks the Case', is that what you were going to say?" The young man tsk'd. "Go back to the first one. No mention of Lord Saltire at all, is there? And the second—dear me, it seems Mister Harker's murder was solved by the Yard on its own, without any help from you."

The old man tossed the sheets of newspaper aside. "What kind of game is this?"

"A new kind. Here." The young man drew a small book from his pocket and tossed it at the older, who caught it one handed and held it up to the light to study.

"A pirated edition of the doctor's memoirs, printed in America some time before the war. What has this to do with anything?"

"Take a look at the catalog card inside."

The old man drew it out. "Fiction?" He scowled at the slip of cardboard. "Why would they file it under fiction?"

"They didn't," the young man replied. "I did. In New York, and Washington, and now in London and Edinburgh too. And it's not just the doctor's memoirs. Debrett's, the Britannica, every newspaper you were ever mentioned in, every photograph that was ever taken of you—everything altered, re-labelled, or destroyed."

"Preposterous! It would take an army to do all that!"

The young man didn't show his teeth when he smiled, or any sign of human warmth. "No, just a few starving librarians, and some intimacy with the bureaucratic mind. People are actually rather sheep-like, you see; no matter what they *know*, they'd never dare contradict a reclassification circular from the New York Public Library or the Bibliotheque National." His smile broadened. "Would you like to know what the best part was? For twenty pounds, I had a curator at the National Portrait Gallery replace your picture with one of a spiritualist named Doyle."

"A spiritualist!?" the old man spluttered. "But—this is preposterous! There are thousands of people who know who I am! And tens of thousands who know what I've done!"

"Thousands of *old* people," the young man corrected. "Thousands of *very* old people who will soon be very *dead* people, and then what? You won't be forgotten—too many small boys have play-acted at being detectives for that to happen. But as far as history is concerned, you'll

be no more real than Falstaff or Paul Bunyan or the 'Napoleon of Crime' you turned my father into. Someone with your name will be remembered, sir, but not you."

With a slight bow—no more, really, than a nod of his head—the young man turned toward the door. The old man struggled to his feet. His heart was pounding. It was impossible. It had to be a joke, a ruse, part of some larger plot. "Falstaff?" he snarled. "Paul Bunyan?" His chest—it felt like he'd been kicked by a horse. He went down to his knees, tobacco spilling onto the cottage floor as he drew the Remington from his slipper.

The young man paused, his hand on the door, but didn't turn around. "In the back, sir?" he asked quietly.

The old man didn't answer. His hands were shaking too much to cock the pistol. Sparkling dots swam before his eyes as the future strolled whistling down the path, leaving a legend behind it. •

Amidst the crossed threads a coiled serpent consumed its own tail. Like all Marjorie's work, Susan found it both beautiful and terrible.

## A Coil of Thread

Trevor J. Morrison

Brake lights filtered through the brume, suffusing the rain-lashed windshield with an ugly, bleeding red: the color of migraines. Wipers thrummed, a steady cadence to match the throb in Susan Colbert's temples.

In the sedan's dark interior, she wept.

Paul offered no consoling words, nor did he place a hand on her thigh; such comforting gestures, once plentiful, had vanished. He navigated the wet streets, knuckles white against the wheel.

"Have you decided?" he asked.

"No," Susan replied. "Not yet."

"If you quit," he said, "we'll lose everything."

"I know that," she snapped, more harshly than intended. "I just—"

"Take more time. You just need more time to think about it."

She turned to face the back seat. Kara slept, enervated by the latest chemotherapy session. Paul didn't understand. How could he expect her to continue nursing other people's children back to health as if nothing were wrong? Take more time, he says. Time wouldn't change anything.

"I can't work with kids anymore." Susan's voice wavered while she observed Kara's slumber, as deep as the oblivion of bears in winter. "I

won't do it."

Paul dropped Susan off at Brookview Hospital. She trudged to the front door, letting the torrent drench her. From the lobby, she watched the car disappear into the storm, silently cursing Paul for influencing her decision. She couldn't quit; not with him reminding her of their financial demise every time the notion occurred. Within the week, she transferred to a vacant position on the third floor, where she spent most of her shifts crushing pills for geriatric patients, wishing circumstances had let her stay in pediatrics.

"Your patient's calling, Susan," said Maud, the charge nurse. "Ivan Halloway in three-nineteen."

"Thanks." Susan organized her medication cart and pushed it into the corridor. Marjorie must be pestering Ivan again. He called a dozen times a night, though Susan rarely heard the bell anymore. Memories of the past several months haunted her, rendering her world gossamer thin.

"Kara's responding well," Dr. Stetson had said after the first round of chemo. Spectacles framed her warm eyes. Soft lines formed at the corners of her mouth when she smiled—a face that had promised perhaps a thousand frightened parents that their dying child would be all right.

As time passed and Kara failed to improve, the oncologist's optimism faded to empty reassurances: "She has a rare tissue type. Finding her a marrow donor will be difficult, but we're still hopeful." No relative had tested favorably. No need for Dr. Stetson to explain how dismal were the chances of finding a compatible donor outside the family.

From the back corner of room 319, his eyes frosted by cataracts, Ivan Halloway watched Susan enter. She doubted he recognized her, or even remembered her from one day to the next. Opposite him, the ward's oldest occupant tended to her embroidery behind the privacy curtain.

"You're going to get stuck with Marjorie Willard, 'cause you're new," Maud had admonished Susan during her orientation. "Just keep her curtain closed so she doesn't bother her roommates. And don't listen to anything she says. Gets under your skin after a while."

For Susan, it soon became evident that the privacy curtain served at best as an imperfect barrier.

"What is it now, Ivan?" Susan asked.

Ivan mumbled under his breath, eyeing the curtain warily.

"Is Marjorie bothering you?"

"She said I'll die tomorrow," he replied, looking at her but focusing on nothing.

Susan sighed. "Ignore her. It isn't true." She mixed bitter powder from her tray with pudding and spooned it into his mouth. Like feeding an oversized baby. How she missed caring for patients with some hope for recovery.

"Suzy?" A voice rasped from behind the curtain as Ivan swallowed the last of his medicated pudding. "What's keeping you?" Ivan, starting at the sound, knocked the cup from Susan's hand. A dark stain spread beneath his sheets.

"I'll be there in a minute," replied Susan, wrinkling her nose at the stench. No one had called her Suzy since the third grade, but correcting Marjorie only encouraged her.

Susan called for an aide while Ivan regarded Marjorie's corner with an ashen face. His lips quivered. Only once in her life had Susan ever seen anyone look as terrified—Paul, the moment Dr. Stetson informed them of Kara's condition.

"Move me to another room," Ivan pleaded softly, apparently unaware that he had soiled his bed. "Save me from her."

"Don't bother whispering!" Marjorie shouted. "I can hear every word. Nothing's wrong with my ears, you know."

Gus, one of the night aides, arrived with a linen cart and an irritable look, though he brightened once he realized that he hadn't been summoned for a Marjorie-related task.

"You'll be okay," Susan assured Ivan. She gathered Marjorie's medication from the cart and pushed the curtain aside.

An antique lamp on Marjorie's night stand cast an oily glow, throwing crooked shadows on the quilt and curtain. Snug in her blankets, the old woman was all bones in onionskin, teeth like weatherworn pales. Silver cobwebs framed her face. Piercing gray-green eyes watched gnarled hands labor at a cross-stitch.

"Took you long enough, Suzy," said Marjorie, feeding the needle through the fabric on her hoop.

"It's a busy ward," Susan retorted, "especially with Ivan calling me every hour." She proffered pills. Anti-psychotics. They never seemed to do much good. Marjorie dropped the hoop on her quilt to swallow them. Amidst the crossed threads a coiled serpent consumed its own

tail. Like all Marjorie's work, Susan found it both beautiful and terrible.

"Ivan's not my problem," Marjorie said. She scratched at the back of her hands, a familiar habit. Ragged nails painted angry red lines on the skin.

"He's pretty upset," said Susan. "Even begged to be moved away from you."

Marjorie gathered the hoop from her lap and twirled the needle between her thumb and forefinger. "Go ahead and move him. Ivan's near the end of his thread. Nothing you do will change that."

Susan turned to leave. "Don't talk to him, okay?"

"He's the lucky one," Marjorie called after her. "If only I could die tomorrow and finally be rid of this place."

Susan glanced at her watch. Seven hours till her shift ended, followed by an appointment with Dr. Stetson in the morning, certain to be another harrowing affair.

"I can take Kara myself," Paul had offered. "You shouldn't go after working all night."

"And what would I do?" she had demanded. "Fret about the house till you get back? I'll stay up and come." But with so many hours still ahead of her, she doubted the wisdom of her decision.

"You all right, Susan?" asked Gus, having finished changing Ivan's bed. Susan realized she was shaking. "Is Marjorie getting on your case?"

Susan nodded stiffly, trying to stem the tears before they began. A half-truth perhaps, but she couldn't deny it without prompting further questions. Her colleagues on this ward were strangers who knew nothing of her family crisis. She had no friends here and wanted none.

"She's mad," said Gus. Susan felt certain Marjorie could overhear, but nothing stirred behind the curtain. "Always getting the other patients worked up, dangling her threads in their faces and telling them she knows when they'll die. Thinks she's going to live forever, you know? Told me that on my first shift."

"You've been working here long?"

"Long enough. Trust me, time hasn't made her better company." He shook his head. "Ignore her. Don't listen to a damn thing she says."

Good advice, Susan thought. Too bad she was so much better at dispensing it to others than following it herself.

"You still there, Gus?" Marjorie called. "Be a dear and take me outside for a smoke."

Gus grimaced. "Well, duty calls."

Susan finished her rounds. Preoccupation distorted her perception, making hours blur past like pages fanned beneath a thumb, making sounds seem perpetually too soft and colors too bright. When morning arrived, she found Paul waiting with Kara by the nurses' station. She gently squeezed her daughter, then collapsed into Paul's embrace and buried her face in his chest.

"Long night?" he asked softly.

"The only kind," she replied, trying to savor the tender moment. So few passed between them these days.

"Sorry, Susan," Maud interrupted. "Tracy's called in sick. Would you mind working the night shift?"

Susan considered. "Sure."

"Again?" Paul inquired, face clouded by emotions Susan couldn't identify. "You're working too much."

"It's okay," she said. Fatigue made smiling difficult. "It makes me feel a little better." More half-truths—they were becoming intrinsic to her philosophy. In a sense, she had taken this lousy position at his behest, and part of her blamed him for her discontent. Besides, his original argument still carried weight—they desperately needed the money. Bills piled up, many of them medical expenses, and his income had plummeted since Kara's diagnosis.

"We should get going," Susan said, but panic gripped her a moment later when she realized that Kara was nowhere in sight. An obedient girl, she never wandered away alone. "Where's Kara?"

Worry twisted Paul's face. "I don't know. I didn't see her go."

"Wait here," Susan said, "in case she comes back." What awful parents this ordeal has made us, she thought.

The ward bustled with the start of morning rounds. Susan dodged linen carts, snapping her head in every direction, ducking into one room after another without success. Kara could be in any one of them. How had she slipped away?

"Guess what, Susan?" said Gus, a broad smile crossing his face. He had changed into his street clothes and was going off duty. Susan didn't have time for an anecdote, but he persisted. "Marjorie's got a visitor, first one I've ever seen. Her granddaughter, maybe even her great-granddaughter... yeah, could be—"

Susan didn't hear Gus finish; she was already running toward

room 319. No, please, she thought, let Kara be anywhere else.

In the narrow gap between the curtain and the floor, Susan saw the shadow of two small feet and heard the low reverberation of Marjorie's whisper. She crossed the room, able only to guess at the terrible things Marjorie must be saying, and pulled the curtain back.

Marjorie, still working on her serpentine pattern, appeared to be ignoring Kara. The girl turned her bald head and looked up, wide eyes reflecting the greasy lamplight with a sense of calm wonder.

"Come on, sweetie," said Susan, taking her daughter's hand. "We don't want to be late."

"Goodbye, Marjorie," said Kara.

"Goodbye, Kara." Marjorie reached over to press something into Kara's tiny palm. "Don't forget," she said, returning to her craft. Kara's gaze did not leave the needle until the curtain fell.

• • •

From the doorway, Susan regarded her daughter's bedroom. Homemade art decorated the walls. Toys littered the carpet. Kara had spent many hours here during the preceding months, whenever home from the hospital. Now she might never return to it; Susan had to face the possibility.

Reclining as best she could on the small bed, she rolled a dusty coil of silver thread between her fingers—the token Marjorie had slipped into Kara's hand. The ends were tied fast; the hard knot bit into Susan's fingertips. She dreaded the confrontation waiting for her at Brookview when she sought to discover what the old woman had told Kara during their brief interview. As with the significance Marjorie placed on the gift, Susan's tired mind generated only disturbing possibilities.

Downstairs, cabinet doors banged shut and glass tinkled against glass—common cacophonies. Paul. They hardly spoke anymore, except for routine phrases to get them through the day. Even with Kara readmitted to the children's hospital, her sickness remained, infecting the household. Susan perceived it as a wedge, forcing her and Paul farther apart with every unspoken word.

A wedge, and a pea beneath the mattress as she awaited sleep.

Sparse light seeped through the living room window from an overcast sky: a sickly, colorless melange. Slouched in his armchair, Paul cradled an empty flute. An empty wine bottle rested on the floor. Susan considered waking him, but that would only invite the tired silence to stretch between them once again. She pecked his cheek and shut the door gently behind her.

Upon arriving at Brookview, she found Marjorie outside the lobby in her wheelchair. Gus loitered nearby, arms wrapped around his torso as a shield against the cold. Marjorie puffed on a cigarette and pretended he wasn't there.

"Go inside, Gus," Susan said. "I'll take Marjorie back to her room when she's ready." Gus thanked her and hurried through the sliding doors. Marjorie inhaled deeply and continued to stare across the parking lot without acknowledging Susan's arrival.

"You should quit that," said Susan, when she could stand the silence no longer. "Those things will kill you."

"I thought so too," said Marjorie, giving the butt a look of betrayal before snuffing it out. "You never mentioned you had a daughter."

"She... well, it never came up," Susan said. "Kara's very sick."

"Her thread is short," agreed Marjorie. "She doesn't have much time."

Tears of frustration formed in spite of Susan's anger. "Is that what you told her? That she'll die?" The lump in her throat quivered and burned. She fingered the coil of thread in her pocket. Not yet, she thought. Not out here.

"I would never tell that to someone so young," Marjorie said, scratching once again at the back of her hand. "What's wrong with her?"

"Acute leukemia," Susan replied softly. "She needs a marrow transplant." What would be gained from withholding details?

Marjorie nodded gravely, nails still raking the tender flesh. "My problem – my disease – resides in the blood as well. It's kept me alive too long," she said, her voice like frayed wire. "Kara and I are much the same. We've both been punished by time, me with too much of it and her with too little."

Cold wind invaded their niche. Raindrops drummed on the pavement, the vanguard of a downpour. Susan shivered beneath her coat. Marjorie appeared unbothered.

"Let's go inside," Susan suggested, steering the wheelchair into the lobby.

The bed opposite Marjorie's was ominously empty. All of Ivan's personal effects were gone.

"Has Ivan been moved?" Susan asked as she helped the old woman into bed.

Marjorie shook her head. "He reached the end of his thread this morning. They wrapped him up and took him away."

Coldness permeated every inch of Susan's skin, as if she had fallen through the crust of a frozen pond. "You couldn't have known."

"Why not, Suzy?" Marjorie asked. "I've been watching people die for a very long time." She held her cross-stitch against her thigh and traced the ouroboros with a crooked finger. "There's a thread in each of us, Suzy. Keeps us from unraveling. When we reach the end, we die. Everyone but me."

"Why not you?" Susan couldn't believe she had asked the question.

"My thread is a coil without an end," Marjorie replied. "While it remains whole, I will never die. Someone must cut it for me, and in all my years of waiting, I've found only one person who can."

A coil without an end. Susan pulled it from her pocket. "That's why you gave this to Kara?"

Even in the dim light, Marjorie's pupils shrank. "You shouldn't have taken that from her. It doesn't concern you."

"If it concerns Kara, it concerns me," said Susan. "I don't want her involved in this nonsense."

"It'll save her life, Suzy." Marjorie's dusty emeralds met Susan's eyes. "If she severs it, she will be the beneficiary of all my unwanted years. You said she needed a marrow transplant? Well, this is better."

Tired warnings echoed in Susan's ears, half-remembered fragments of voices she couldn't place. Ignore her. Don't listen to anything she says.

"Sever it yourself," she said.

Marjorie laughed, like fire caressing dry tinder. "Once I could have, but my scissors were taken from me long ago. I can't do it, and neither could you."

"I don't—"

"Believe me? You don't have to," Marjorie said. "But remember, Suzy, I've seen Kara's thread. She won't live long, not without my help."

The curtain swayed, drawing a breath of fluorescent light inside

and breaking the spell. Susan stepped past it. Time may blur in Marjorie's domain, but in the world beyond, it pressed on. Susan had work to do.

Since the old woman wouldn't let Susan return the coil, it rested in her pocket. Despite its diminutive size, she could feel its presence against her thigh as though it were a fistful of lead.

Just cut the damned thing yourself, she thought. No harm in it. Prove it's nothing more than a bit of string. But who needed proof? She thought of Ivan's empty bed and shivered.

She found scissors at the nurses' station and placed the thread between the blades. The handle began to tingle, then vibrate. She applied pressure and felt it pulsate through her arm all the way to her shoulder. The coil hummed in the scissors' grasp.

The nurses' station vanished, replaced by a scene that jittered and shook like an old black-and-white movie reel. Marjorie lay in bed, absorbed in her craft. A nurse approached. Judging from the old-fashioned uniform, Susan witnessed an occurrence from many years ago. Marjorie, however, looked no different, save that the creases on her face were perhaps not quite as deep.

"Good news, Ms. Willard," the nurse said, her voice a distorted tremolo. "Your blood test results arrived. You're in perfect health."

Marjorie sagged into her mattress. "That's not what I wanted to hear." She sighed. "I should be dead by now."

"We can't choose that for ourselves," the nurse said. "If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know."

"You can't help me," Marjorie replied. "No one here can."  
The scene shifted.

"You're not ill, Ms. Willard," a doctor explained. "We've been over this before."

"Something's wrong with me," Marjorie said. "I can feel it."

"We've run every imaginable test. You have an unusual tissue type—nothing more," he said. "You're in excellent health for your age. If only we could all be so fortunate."

"Don't say that!" Marjorie spat. "You wouldn't think so if you were trapped in this bed."

Another scene followed, and another, all largely the same: Marjorie lying in bed with only her cross-stitch for company. Susan pitied her – a poor woman waiting for a death that never came.

As hard as she tried, Susan couldn't sever the thread. The scissors, notched as though she had tried to cut piano wire, slipped from her hand and struck the counter. Sweat trickled along trembling fingers.

Marjorie had said that she and Kara were much the same. What if they had something in common that Marjorie didn't realize?

"Do you need something, Susan?" asked the unit clerk.

Susan tucked the unbroken thread into her pocket and hid her tremulous hands. "Get me Marjorie Willard's permanent record."

• • •

"No way," Paul said. "Absolutely not."

"You don't understand what you're objecting to," said Susan.

"You couldn't have found a donor for Kara at work," said Paul. "It's absurd."

"She and Kara are a perfect match. The lab ran the compatibility tests three times to be sure."

Paul turned to Dr. Stetson, who had waited patiently with her hands steepled at her chin. "Please, tell her it's madness."

Dr. Stetson removed her glasses and leaned forward, her typically cheerful face grave and chiseled.

"It's a risk, Mr. Colbert," she agreed, "but there's always a measure of risk involved in this sort of procedure. If you'd prefer, we can keep waiting, but there are no guarantees that we will find a better prospect. It's true that our potential donor," she glanced at the file on her desk, holding her glasses to the bridge of her nose, "Ms. Marjorie Willard, isn't an ideal candidate, due to her age, but given our lack of alternatives, the hospital administration is willing to make an exception."

"Even if it works, the operation will kill her," continued Paul. "Her family will claim Susan coerced her. We'll be sued."

"She has no family, Paul. There's no one to sue anybody," said Susan, fortified by insight. She knew why no one ever visited Marjorie: the poor woman had outlived everyone she cared about. "Marjorie knows she won't survive the surgery. She doesn't want to."

Something flittered across Paul's face. It was, Susan realized, his last shred of hope fighting to survive. She took his hand.

"We won't do this if you don't want to," she said, "but I think it's Kara's only chance."

He pulled her towards him, the last of his resistance crumbling away.

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Marjorie Willard survived the operation but never regained consciousness. She died six hours later.

"It's what she wanted," Susan assured herself when the guilt became too much to bear.

While waiting in post-op to visit Kara, Susan found Marjorie's thread in her pocket.

"Kara must cut it," Marjorie had insisted after agreeing to the transplant. "Before the surgery, not after."

"No," Susan had protested. "It sounds crazy. Like magic."

"Enough!" Marjorie had barked. "This operation of yours seems like strange magic to me, but I've agreed to it nonetheless. Whether you believe makes no difference."

Susan had checked her disbelief and committed to giving Kara the thread. She turned the silver coil over in her hands, wondering why she hadn't fulfilled Marjorie's final request. An oversight, she told herself, knowing it at once for a lie. A bond doubtlessly existed between Kara and Marjorie, strong enough to lure the young girl to Marjorie's bedside for their chance meeting. Susan couldn't comprehend it, any more than she could explain how Marjorie had predicted Ivan's death with nothing more than a strand of thread, but the reality of it frightened her.

"Mrs. Colbert," an MD said, "you may see Kara now." He led her to an isolation room, Kara's new home till her immune system recuperated.

"Sweetie," Susan said, eyes brimming.

Kara reached her small hands from under the blankets and grasped Susan's arm.

"It didn't work," she whispered, her voice thin and weak.

"Yes it did, honey," Susan said. "You're going to be fine."

Kara's nimble fingers pried Susan's hand open. The coil of thread hummed and burned in Susan's palm.

"You fool," Kara said. "What have you done?"

Her expression became unsettling and familiar, though Susan had last seen it upon another face. The girl began to scratch. Pale red gouges already lined the backs of her hands. •

# The Lullaby Stream

A.M. Arruin

in the bleached clearing  
where birch bones rattle noon  
between two plots of smoking grass  
runs the lullaby stream  
one bank awake with weeds  
the other empty with sleep

each night the forest boy reclines to dream of rest  
but tumbles to the stream instead

both banks elude him  
he slaps the cold whorls  
breaks fingernails on rocks  
clawing mud clouds and moonlight blisters  
all night the stream sings  
he listens through open eyes

morning—  
water spits him to the fever weeds

his hair is frozen •

"He's not a zombie," Calla balled her fists, watching as her father somnambulated out of the room. "How long has he been like this?"

# The Blood of a Virgin is Not Easy to Come by Legitimately

Wesley Herbert

Calla Trop was always sticking out: tall for her age, capped by a comb-breaking sheath of red curls and seemingly composed of all arms and legs with oversized feet and hands that made her envy her starling sized contemporaries at the Moonbeam Academy for Gifted Misanthropes. The Moonbeams all started out from good families, scions of the depraved rich who had wallowed out of all the proper cram schools, but Calla felt like a spell of spitting fiery missiles among them. With explosive heads. On a short fuse.

It was a warm spring day. Too nice to spend in the academy salons learning tricky-peg or even the concrete playground doing shadow-shadow drills. So Calla went over the wall on the target range, and was gone before matins. That early in the day the chance of some godbox constable full of sunshine and light spotting a lone truant was too high even for a nearly graduated Moonbeam to put the dodge on. So Calla took her long legs through the

boulevards of mausoleums, each one built higher than the last, where diviniteers plied trade secrets of the future from their dead ancestors to power the fleets of the merchant princes. The tartan skirt that came to the knees of her fellow Moonbeams rode indecently high on her thighs, prompting dozens of stiff-suited salarymen to gawk and rubberneck. Down little streets in Swabton, and finally to the canals and saltwater smell of the marble piazzas by the sea.

She settled in a little iron chair and table with her copy of Sasinus' Cabarets and a steaming bowl of kave-laced goat's milk that she proceeded to swamp with spoonfuls of evaporated cane juice. Let's see some other Moonbeam eat that for breakfast. The ethereal little alfars seemed to exist on nothing but air and mineral water, but Calla had caught them in the dormitory watercloset sticking a finger down each other's throats after vespers (friends don't let friends purge alone). Calla ate whatever she pleased and never seemed to be anything but taller and skinnier.

She was lucky to find an empty table. The piazza was bustling with dashing and disreputable city bravos, wizened men with their games of mumblestones, barefoot saltdogs on shore leave, corpulent matrons inside yards of finest silk that displayed vast, milk-white expanses of cleavage like full moons overlapping in the night sky, and even the odd salon diva enjoying a light meal at the end of a busy night, oozing confidence and sex, sometimes literally as overburdened love charms and contraceptive potions shorted out, making one bookish little fellow deep inside today's broad-sheets shudder and quick march away from the café with his paper held in front of his lap, a look of horror on his face.

Thus hidden in the crowd Calla enjoyed her book and stretched her limbs in the weak morning sunshine, tanning her freckles.

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At loose ends, she walked the width of the city. Watched the tugs, nosing barges from the bare-masted forest of spars in the harbor to the trade houses and water-ports of the city. The tugs were dragonboats; powered by rusting blood crucibles affixed at

the waterline, shaped like kraken or mermaids, metal tails churning the waters, nostrils oozing a cloying red fog that roiled over the surface in a slimy mist, polluting the very air. City toughs and fishwives wore the latest Callatian fashions bought off flat-bottom barges by the pound. The vast wealth of the merchant princes, the only real wealth—magic—skimmed the top layer of luxury from the world in their fleets and dressed the rough of her home like a king's prized marmot. Magic crucibles powered the city. Spreading its influence onto the seas, threading kleptocrats through the world.

New buildings were everywhere. Palaces and salons, warehouses and teahouses, stood just above the red-tinged waterline of the canals. Architects were imported by the job lot. And everywhere glammers hung like ghostly dreams, transforming building fronts into eddying spells so complex that some of them were nearly living creatures. Omnipresent were shades of Stolass, patron saint and visceral symbol of the city's redemption in any number of his endless tasks after his martyrdom, captured at sea by pirates.

She got twigged in the garden of Contemptible Serenity. In part due to a grandfather who had wanted boys and had only girls, and in part due to her father's remarriage later in life, Calla was blessed with a big family. Nearest her own age, however was Kai, the son of her mother's cousin. And after Kai, her older half-brother, Mordrun. Kai and Mordrun, as unlike physically as anyone she'd met, yet alike in many ways. The temperament of martyrs. The two of them caught up to her on the far side of the garden.

"Calla," Kai sighed. The wearied patience of someone a full year older. "We've been looking for you all day. Why weren't you in school?" Never mind for the moment that her aunt Lissandra had pulled Kai out of school when he was ten to travel the world from Justinian to Gozeros.

"Cal," Mordrun followed up. His blue eyes unreadable. Mordrun did most of his talking in the pauses between words. She remembered him as a quiet stuffed bear from her childhood. An implacable comfort, who carried her around under her parent's feet. But not today. "It's father," he sighed.

"Bad?" she asked. It had to be bad.

"He's a little bit dead," Mordrun said. As he opened his mouth to say more Kai interrupted.

"It's the Witch of Kimolia," Kai explained.

Mordrun at least had the good manners to look embarrassed.

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The situation was not as dire as first stated. Calla punched Mordrun, hard, when she got home. Her ancestral home was in the core of the Kleptocrat district beneath the 200 foot tall glowing statue of Stolass, nodding his head disapprovingly and mouthing wisdom from a forever silenced mouth. Her father, Dyschoraf the Blue Mage, was shambling around the library, re-arranging books and the servants were terrified to go near him. His eyes were rolled up, mostly whites, and the silk nightrobe hung off his shoulders. An egg-yolk stain encrusted the neat, trimmed beard that surrounded his mouth. The beard was almost entirely white; he used to joke that it was black until Calla was born. Now he didn't even see her. Calla stood in front of him and he shuffled around her, continuing his task. Yew, Calla's only sister and a seasoned delver of rare antiquities—a tomb robber—had arrived moments before with their older brother, Tromeros. Her older siblings were themselves rich and famous: the whole thing was part of a complicated escapade that Tromeros, Yew and Mordrun had gotten wrapped up in, involving a dragon named Mazek Bronzebones and a fabulously wealthy gnome named Zuke, who was having trouble locating a bride. It sufficed to say that Trommy's cut of the proceeds allowed him to pick up a prime chunk of real estate with the kind of historical background obsessive wizards found interesting.

Yew stood by the library door with both hands clapped over her mouth in horror. Mordrun helped her to one of the overstuffed armchairs and sat her down.

"He's, he's zombified!" Yew burst into tears. "How could she do this to him? They used to be partners!"

"He's not a zombie," Calla balled her fists, watching as her father somnambulated out of the room. "How long has he been like this?"

“Not so much an undeath as a living death,” Kai smirked.

“Since last night. Doesn’t sleep anymore, doesn’t talk, just works and eats. Made himself breakfast, wouldn’t get dressed though,” Mordrun said.

“That Witch, I know she carries grudges, but this is too much,” Calla hissed out. Then: “Where’s mother?”

“Athra went for help this morning. Since he’s not in any—um —immediate danger. She’s talking to auntie Lissandra. Maybe even Lissandra’s dad’s contacts. She’s, umm, upset.”

“Upset!” Kai sat cross-legged on the San Sureen rug, looted from the vault of the Borungian Vaudg at great personal risk to Calla’s parents. “Fit to grind her into flour to bake her bread and feed to the royal swans, you mean. Aint no coming back from that, don’t care what godbox you pay or what witch you are. Try resurrecting swan droppings.” Kai found it infinitely amusing.

“Kai,” Yew paled, bolted up from the chair. “Lissandra wouldn’t let her—I mean, your mom, your granddad, they know terrible people! No one deserves what they’d do.”

“And just because father decided he wouldn’t follow the witch into the Gibbering Wormhole of Madness and the Far Realm all those years ago, he doesn’t deserve this,” Calla interrupted. “Let’s talk about what we’re doing to fix father.” As if cued from the wings of a penny dreadful stage play, her father walked back into the room. He’d found a cup of kave somewhere and sipped it as he walked and stared at a proposal for the selection of necromancers as an endangered species. The brown drink ran down his shirt front. Calla wiped his chin with her sleeve as he passed. Yew began to cry.

“Well, you know, we really couldn’t interfere, all things considered.” Mordrun gulped visibly. “You know. Things. Being considered. For what they are.”

“He’s your father!” Calla yelled. “And he’s been cursed!” Somehow one of her father’s large, leather-bound volumes on the lore of goblin shamans had found its way into her hand and the binding squeaked as she clenched it. “Someone knows how to cure him,” she growled before making her voice sweet and putting down the heavy object. “Just tell me. Just the name. And I’ll see them myself.”

Tromeros gave her one glance through the shaggy hair that hung around his face. He was twice her age and had a timeless handsomeness that made more than one person think he was touched by the fey. Other wizards laboured at the creation of Talosian giants but Trommy had turned to the smallest of magics. Miniaturization was the way of the future, he maintained. He also sidelined in grand illusions for all occasions, and could conjure a dracolich apparition that could make the Knights of Myth Drunnor soil their armor, and had in fact done so. Tromeros was, by anyone's standards, a genius.

"What?" he asked in exasperation from where he hunched over a worktable.

He was also sometimes a jerk. Trommy didn't like unannounced social calls from strangers, and had a very acute sense of justice combined with their father's sense of irony and his mother's morbidity. Trespassers who triggered the defensive wards of his tower were likely to end up turned inside-out. Possibly liquefied. Technically non-lethal, but... best not explored if you didn't want to spend your life in a wine carafe.

"Don't you care? Don't any of you care?" Calla slammed a fist into a nearby table, toppling several alchemical glasses.

"Can you please not touch anything?" Trommy snapped. Flapping the sleeves of his robe, he climbed down from the stool. From some hidden place he produced a slip of paper and held it out to her. "I'm sorry. Look, just take this, okay? I've already had to talk to Athra about this and Mordrun, and the Council of Ten and I'm tired of it."

Calla moved to take the paper. "What is it?"

"It's the ingredients to a spell that will remove the curse. Oh, wait," he produced a ring and handed it over. "You'll need this too. Bring father to the centre of the Acrorexia labyrinth before dawn tomorrow, put on the ring, say the words over these items, etcetera, etcetera, curse is lifted. Can you go now?"

"Why can't you do it?" Kai asked. "If you're such a great wizard?"

"Look, this is easy. You can't brew a cup of kave in this town without bringing the three jeweled toe-rings of Ganth out of the Swamp of Despair, or whatever. Get through the maze, defeat the monsters, say the words, yadda yadda."

"You can't break the witch's spell, can you?" Kai asked. "Not her Lore of the Gibbering Madness." The coin of the Far Realm was your sanity; a misfired spell could leave you with a slobbering spawn of tentacles from the neck up, and it would be a mercy.

"That's just stupid. I can too break the curse."

"It's not 'can't'." Calla stuffed the paper in the pocket of her leather jacket. "It's won't. Wouldn't dare oppose the witch. Well, that means pixie-squat to me. If the witch gets in my way, one way or the other she's getting out of my way."

Closing her eyes, she kissed her father's cheek and stomped from the room, dragging Kai up off the floor with her.

• • •

Calla shouldered her bag of supplies and adjusted the handle of Spiny Norman where it stuck out through the pack straps. It was an uncomfortable lump of metal on the end of a big stick but Calla had reluctantly let the heirloom convince her to take it along. Norman had been a decoration in her room since she was a babe old enough to remember. The cylindrical steel head with its radiating points was forged in the dwarven fires of Fell Kharas and sealed with enchantments and the rune for breaking things, but the wooden handle had been rotted through. It had made a good coat rack when she became a teenager and she had in fact hung her hats on it, much to its chagrin. But Norman had been a wealth of interesting stories, most of them about heroes who'd used it to bash their way to glory. Its true name was something like Egbert Getyourmeal, unpronounceable to a four-year old Calla, who had dubbed it Spiny Norman instead.

*Magic! The very air stinks of it. Clench me that I might crush the wizard!*

"Well, duh, Norman. The whole city stinks. Of course there's magic everywhere. I'll be the one who decides when there's smashing to be done. I brought you along for advice, not mass destruction."

Destruction! Norman echoed.

"The pen is mightier than the sword," Kai said. "Hadn't you heard?"

*Hard knocks!* Norman insisted.

"Shhh, I'm reading."

Twilight spread like velvet fog between the buildings of the city while the setting sun painted the tower tops red, like burning candles. Calla held the paper close to her face trying to read in the darkness, but as she stood there a cloud of white lights bubbled out of a stone beehive at the nearest intersection. The individual will-o-wisps broke apart like beads across a marble floor and began their nightly patrols along the avenues, the hard white ghost-light illuminating the thoroughfares, keeping the citizens safe from alleybashers and cut-throats until morning. Setting off with Kai in tow, her stride lengthened and Kai sped up on his shorter legs.

"Cal," Kai said.

"Hmm?"

"Where we going?"

"Gotta see a man about a bird."

"Cal."

"What?"

"What's that?"

Following his pointing finger, Calla spied the bank of smoke barreling up the empty boulevard behind them. Like a comet shrouded in vapour flying right for them. As she watched, occasional sparks belched out of the cloud. She stood rooted to the ground horrified. As it reached the Aramel canal it dove into the water with a gout of hissing steam and as it emerged from the other bank she got her first look at it. Like a trunkless elephant with two curling tusks, an armored juggernaut on six or more legs. Hellish blue eyes shone like lanterns and the glow of some internal flame belched from the mouth, almost immediately surrounding it again in smoke.

*Ah the quarry! A Flaming Bezzok.* Norman shouted in glee. *Their weakness is from the inside. Let it swallow you whole and smash the bladders of gas that power its flames. You'll need proofing against fire, of course.*

"Run," Kai and Calla said as one.

They had a sizable lead, and neither was slow, but after ten blocks the Bezzok had closed the distance to half a block.

"Miscreants," a loud voice accosted them, as they were both

haloed in white light. "You are in violation of curfew. And is that a licensed magical weapon? Looks like you stuck a broom handle up a dire flail's butt." Above them floated one of the city's many will-o-wisp street lights.

"You've gotta be joking me," Calla moaned.

Ahead of them was the Serpentine, the longest, winding canal in the city. Calla and Kai headed for the nearest bridge.

The streetlight wasn't done with them. It zipped around their heads. "You're not stopping. That's leaving the scene of a crime. Hey. Stop. Listen, now. Stop." It sent out a fat blue spark that crackled into Calla's shoulder and made her arm go numb. "That's a warning shot. Now, about your pet Bezzok. It's not leashed. That's against the city ordinance."

"Bill me," she growled as the two sped over the bridge. The Bezzok had slid onto flat ground and was closing the gap.

"I'm warning you," the light snapped. An arc of blue-white electricity struck Kai in the leg and he went down sprawling.

Calla tripped to a halt and turned to pick up Kai if she had to. But the Bezzok was too close; it would be on them. Six legs churning them to runny eggs. It sensed victory and roared.

*Now girl, smash me, smash me in its face!* Norman bellowed.

The rage took hold of Calla and her lips peeled back from clenched teeth. But Calla didn't draw Spiny Norman. Her hand snatched the glowing wisp and, ignoring the sizzle of burning fingers, she threw it with all her might into the open maw of the Bezzok.

Norman had spoken true. It was vulnerable from the inside. A fantastic explosion erupted from the creature. A tongue of flame thirty cubits long belched from its backside. All six legs were blown into the pavement and bounced skyward. The massive head separated from the neck and launched like a catapult stone up the street at knee height; the angry wind of its passing knocked Calla to the ground beside her cousin.

In the silence that followed only Norman spoke.

*Forge me!*

From out of the night sky a flickering marble-sized light dropped and bounced, coming to rest at Calla's feet. The sorely wounded streetlight moaned as it lay there. Rummaging in her pack, Calla brought out a bottle and pulled the cork loose with

her teeth. Propping Kai up she let him drink down half the contents of the healing potion and guzzled the rest herself. Pausing with one swallow left she poured the contents over the flickering streetlight. Its glow dimmed but became steady. Picking up the marble-sized creature, she dropped it into the bottle and corked it.

"Maybe we should have waited for your mother," Kai said.

Suddenly enormously tired, Calla laughed.

• • •

The first ingredient to the counterspell was purchased from a clan of faeries that lived in the ear of the Stolass monument. It had meant a long and dangerous climb up the outside of the glowing magical tower, but once inside the aural canal the negotiations for a sprinkle of fairy dust swept off the floor had been easy. Calla's coppery hair had entranced some of the younger female fairies and several locks had been exchanged. As a courtesy the fairies showed them the stairs.

The second ingredient had involved more subtlety than Calla could summon up. She had a splitting headache and the healing draught may have been past its best-before date since it was causing some terrible things to happen to her bowels. Inside the Park of Silver Showers Kai had been the one to negotiate the tail-feather of the prismatic birds responsible for the perpetual rainbow over the city; a gift from the Taj royal family after the city had harbored them during the Godfire Wars half a century earlier. There was one bird for each stroke of the rainbow and unfortunately the Violet bird was reluctant to give up a tail feather, regrettably the one colour they required. Kai had put his arm around the man-high bird, resplendent with its scintillating plumage, and explained that he'd been loathe to bring it up, but the Red and the Blue bird had been talking behind Violet's back. The two birds, had in fact, been discussing how they could probably produce a violet feather without her, and that they were seriously reconsidering the necessity of having Violet around at all when the two of them could take care of her colour all by themselves. Kai had his feather in moments with a promise to spread the word that Violet was really a rather indispensable bird.

Stolass changed colour from pale green to pale blue from the midnight hour to dawn, and sometime after a pale blue light bathed the city the two had stumbled into an all-night tea house and ordered several cups of black-eyes, a drink so potent it was like kavezilla. Calla slipped out to the watercloset and cured her distress from the slightly tainted healing potion, only to return to Kai being bullied by a barge captain. The bargemaster was a case of bad ugliness, with the mallet to his cadence drum still through his belt and more than a little orc in his family. Calla slipped the mallet free and started swinging at the surprised brute who, unwisely, blocked with the only thing in hand, his mug full of kave. The kave just wasn't strong enough to defend itself and after she landed a few blows the bargeman had calmed down and apologized. He had in fact hooked them up with a buddy who dealt in penny-quantities of mummy dust. The dust was probably cut with flour but it saved them a trip to the Regurgitating Vortex of Zardoz Temple to raid the tombs for powdered saints.

The last ingredient had posed an ethical dilemma for Calla. The blood of a virgin was not easy to come by legitimately, and she was sure her parents would have something to say if she were involved in any virgin sacrifices. She led Kai around the Dungmarket back alleys in circles, pretending to be lost while she tried to think of any way to make her time of the month happen before dawn. Finally seeing no other way around it she pointed up in the sky and shouted, "Look!". When Kai had looked up she punched him hard in the nose. The blood soaked handkerchief she used to staunch the flow went into her pack with the other ingredients.

*I smell blood! There's treachery afoot. Wield me!* Spiny Norman insisted.

"Shud ub," Kai said.

• • •

"Well," Kai said. "Here we are then."

The Acrorexia Labyrinth lay before them. Calla's father, still in his evening robe, was scribbling endless notes down on the same roll of parchment with a dry ink stick. They had put his

boots on and tied a rope lead around his waist. A crumbling ruin of chambers built on a slight rise in the river delta thousands of years earlier, the Acrorexia had originally been the palace to an ancient line of kings, each one adding more and more rooms, seemingly at random, until it was a maze of chambers a mile across. The last king of the line had been a madman who delighted in hunting and killing children through the rooms at night, but it had all ended very badly for him: something involving his wife, the queen, and the sacred bulls of Modoch that wasn't talked about in polite company. The Acrorexia remained a heart of darkness in the middle of the city, entered by few, exited by fewer still.

"Kinda dark in there. Good luck, Calla, see you and your dad in the morning."

Calla handed him the rope tied around her father's waist and admonished him silently with a single finger. Then she took the empty potion bottle from her pack and rattled it.

"Hey, starshine, good morning!" Almost immediately Calla was overcome by a wave of tears behind her eyes. Her mother's morning greeting had slipped out without thinking. She wished her mom were here right now.

The streetlight glowed fiercely and spikes of electricity radiated from the white ball.

"Nice try, the glass is an insulator. You just keep shining, sparky, and I'll let you go in the morning."

"Why should I believe a delinquent like you?" the streetlight asked, muffled by the glass.

"Just help me get my daddy back from the witch and you're a free moonbeam." She stepped forward with the bottle held high and walked into the black maw of the maze. "Stay close, Kai. And keep the string coming."

They spent what felt like hours lost in the endless chambers and Calla glanced skyward more and more often, searching for any trace of false dawn. But the open-roofed ruin showed only black. The unwavering harsh white light of the bottled streetlight made the stones seem bleached, her father's face ghostly. Kai unraveled a huge skein of yarn as they went and a half-dozen times they crossed their own path and had to retrace their steps. She found herself walking faster and faster until they practically

raced from room to room.

"You know what I don't get, is why now? Why after all these years did the Witch of Kimolia go after your dad?" Kai was glancing sympathetically at her father as he shambled along.

"I dunno. Trommy says she never forgave my dad for packing up his spellbooks and refusing her quest to the Far Realm of Madness. Hard to imagine they were ever on the same side. But you know what day today is, right?"

"No," Kai was unraveling yarn as fast as he could.

"Today's my parents wedding anniversary. My dad never believed in coincidences; I'm starting to think he was right. Well, the witch better hope our moms don't find her, is all I can say," Calla shrugged. "Keep up, it has to be nearby."

It all went wrong when they came to the dead end with the stone throne. The Throne itself had seen years of wear, and the carvings were mostly eroded by time, but a mosaic of thousands of little bits of glass still lept out in bright colour on the wall behind it. Calla shivered as the image of the mad king leered down at them. It was only after they retraced two turns back that they found their trail of yarn had been cut and gone missing.

"Maybe it broke," Kai gulped.

"Maybe." Calla reached to her pack. "And maybe I'm a dragon-rider of Krin." Her hand found the handle of Spiny Norman and tugged him loose. Funny. To think of it as a him.

*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, A Elbereth Githoniel for anything that stands in your way,* the morning star purred.

A stone rattled nearby and Kai jumped, dropping into one of the heroic forms of the open hand taught by his fellows in the Garden of Contemptible Serenity. "There is definitely something out there," Kai's voice trembled.

"Don't be afraid of the dark," Calla advised.

"No," the creature dropped from above, knocking her to the ground. "Be afraid of me. Tremble, mortal, for you face the creature of the night."

Kai roundhouse-kicked it in the head. The fanged, pale man barely flinched. "What, do you think you're some kind of slayer?" It punched once and Kai went down. Picking the boy up, the vampire used a shirt sleeve to wipe his neck clean. "I know what you're asking

yourself: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do you, monk?"

When Calla sent the wooden handle of Spiny Norman through its chest the vampire winced and managed only to mutter the single word, "Typical," before exploding into dust.

"Not bad, for a hatrack." Calla stuck Norman back in her pack. *Barely heroic*, the weapon grumbled.

"Close enough," Kai said as Calla helped him up again. His face dropped. "Um, Cal. Where's your dad?"

Both cousins scrambled to pick up the lightning in a bottle but they were alone in the stone chamber. And there were four exits.

• • •

Calla ran for her father's life. She and Kai had split up to cover more ground. She'd given up on the string and simply ran to cover as much ground as possible, bottle held high, letting her instinct guide her. To the hell of Slow Roasting Fires with strings or maps or anything calm. She was so eternally tired of staying calm. Her father would have summoned a map, or a spirit guide, or used magic to cheat somehow. Everything was a plan with him, an incantation. Well, look where that'd got him. He wasn't any better off than she was right now, worse in fact, since he was both lost and defenseless.

She wished her mother was here. Mother had always been good in a crunch and cleverer than father, outside of a book.

Something moved in the shadows ahead. Putting on a burst of speed Calla charged forward until her light caught the edge of a swirling robe as it rounded a corner. But when she got to the corner the next room had three doorways and her father was nowhere to be seen. She picked the center door and kept running. Four rooms later she was forced to admit she'd gone the wrong way and lost him. She cried in frustration and turned back. Arriving at the first room again she took the left door this time.

The room beyond had obviously once been an open courtyard, perhaps even a garden. It was overgrown with plant life, leaving only a narrow path. One thing the Moonbeam Academy for Gifted Misanthropes had not skimped on in her education were the varieties of lethal flora that were used to defend lairs, ruined forts and wizard's

towers. Trommy disdained their use, preferring roving swarms of homunculi and the odd inversion ward, but the Manse had at least three varieties around the garden wall. Calla easily avoided the Deadly Poison Ivy, the dwarf Triffids, the Blamboo trees and the Whiplash vines. At the centre of the courtyard was a clear paved space, and a low, circular basin filled with water and lily pads (the normal variety, not the eye-gouging kind). Calla sat down on the stone ledge of the pool to cry.

One minute, that's all she'd give herself, then back to the job.

"Pawdon, gulk, can I hewp wou?"

Calla spun round and jumped a foot in the air, landing ready to run or kick the guts out of whoever was in the water. Except for the ripples among the lilies there was no one there. She started to back away.

Then in the harsh white light she saw a golden orange head poke from the water. A goldfish head. The biggest goldfish she'd ever seen. At least two feet long by the size of the parts she could see.

"Gulk," it gasped. "Downt feaw me. Fow I am a magic—gulk—fish."

"I got that by the way you talked. Magic, not magic: you pull anything and I'll batter you for dinner. Just tell me: did you see a wizard come this way? Tall, white beard, wearing a blue night robe."

The fish bobbed underwater to breathe and surfaced again. "Yeth," it nodded.

"Which way did he go?" Calla stepped closer. "Tell me quickly!"

"Fiwst you must fwee me fwum this pool. Gulk—the kiss of a faiw maid will set me fwee."

Calla glared at the fish. "Always with the kissing. How do I know you aren't some sort of pervert?"

"Did I mention I awso gwant wishes. Fwee me and I wiw bwing the wiward to you."

"What do you think, Norman?"

*Take your courage by both hands, like wielding a mighty weapon of old. Also, kiss the fish, I tire of this chase.*

"Okay fish, pucker up. Norman says it's slobberin time."

"Gawp—huwwy!" The fish wriggled closer.

Leaning down, Calla slid her hands into the cold, slimy water and wrapped them around the goldfish. Immediately the fish wiplashed back and forth, struggling and blubbering. In a panic, Calla let go.

"Gaahh, what's wrong?"

"Sowwy, wery sowwy," the fish shuddered. "I hawe issues wif being touched. Gulk—twy again."

This time the fish only wriggled a little until she lifted it out of the water. The scaly body immediately convulsed and spasmed.

"Oh gawds, I can't bweave! I'll newer make it!" the fish screamed and threw itself back in the water. Calla couldn't repress a shudder, as if her skin was crawling free. She danced in a circle, wiping the slime off her hands.

"Guh, guhross!"

"Sowwy, sowwy. One mowe time. It'll wowk, I pwomise."

Visibly shaking, Calla paused but reached for the fish again. This time its head barely broke the surface of the water before its gawping mouth and staring mad eyes began thrashing in her grasp.

"I wawnt to wive!" it screamed.

"Okay." She dropped the fish with a splash and walked away. "Thanks but no thanks fish. Good luck with the kissing."

As she left the courtyard she could still hear it calling: "Wait, gulk, I hawe issues. I'll howd my bweath this time. Weally!"

"Thanks for the tip, Norman, next time don't pimp me out to any strange animals with speech impediments."

*I live in shame, my lady. Dent me if you must, I deserve nothing better.*

Calla grimaced. "Not likely. I think you enjoy getting smashed into things."

*Oh, look, there's Kai of the iron fists and he has your father.* Norman changed the subject.

And there, barely lit, was Kai, leading a docile Dyschoraf the Blue Mage, on his tether. Kai waved in relief and the two cousins hugged.

"Where was he?" Calla asked.

"Sitting on a stone block like it was his desk, dictating messages to a scribe that wasn't there about scroll usage and the need for more parchment. Hey, did you go past that door where if you pull

the handle a pit trap opens under you?"

Calla shook her head. "Nope, did you have to go through that door where it wouldn't open without the password?"

"Yes! And the password was 'friend'?"

"Lame," they both chorused.

"What about the fish that wants to kiss you?"

"What? That's freaky. Not me. Did you see the creepy little guy who wanted to keep asking you riddles?" When Calla shook her head Kai continued. "I ditched him and I swiped this ring off him. Think it's valuable?"

"Who cares? We've got to get to the centre of the maze before sunrise!"

"Oh, right. I found the way, but there's a problem. You'll see."

Kai led them through several twists and turns, counting off right-hand and left-hand turns on his fingers until they emerged into a chamber with two stone doors, side by side, and in front of each door stood the statue of an armored skellig. Kai made an 'after you' gesture and Calla approached the two statues cautiously. A booming voice spoke from everywhere, and nowhere.

"Before you lie two doors. Beyond one, the chamber you seek. Behind the other the Vortex of Oblivion. The only way you can know the difference is by asking the statues. But beware! One speaks only the truth and the other speaks only lies."

Calla began nodding her head impatiently before the voice finished its speech. She turned back to Kai, miming a mouth flapping with her hand, and Kai shrugged and shook his head.

"Don't worry, I know this one," Calla said. She approached the first skellig statue and instead of asking it any questions she tipped it over and with a groan of effort threw it against the first door. Door and statue cracked and as the statue flew through the crumbling remains of the door there was an unholy spark of putrid green flames as it disintegrated with a crackle.

"Wrong door," Calla shrugged before they went through the other way.

• • •

The centre of the maze was a massive rectangular chamber

with squared pillars lining either side that had once supported a wooden roof long gone and rotted to dust. The only other decoration was what once might have been a thick stone table. The table was carved with timeworn runes that would have got Tromeros talking excitedly for hours. But the table had obviously seen better days and a massive crack had split it in two halves. The sky was a dangerous shade of grey. False dawn. The sun was nearly upon them.

"What a dump," Kai sniffed. "Well, we're here. Let's break out the voodoo and get with the spell, pronto. You know, chop cho—"

"Children," a woman's voice said.

A chill ran up Calla's spine. She'd heard it described often enough. The childlike voice of the Witch of Kimolia. From the shadows of the pillars across the room she stepped forward, arms across her chest, her one eye glinting with malice.

"Hello, Calla. Who's your friend?"

"She knows your name!" Kai whispered, unable to keep his eyes from the witch.

"Duh! Who else would I be? You start the spell, I'll take care of her." She handed Kai her bag and the ring from her pocket. Spiny Norman in both hands, she moved to stand between her father and the witch.

Hard knocks! I yearn for the taste of bruises. Smite her! Smite her so hard her children will have black eyes!

"Wouldn't want to do that," Calla smiled wanly and advanced to step up onto the broken slab of the table.

"I can't let you cast that incantation, sweetie. Not after all my hard work. Your father deserves what he got." The witch held both hands up and red energy crackled from her fingers.

"Go ahead."

"Oh, I will."

"I'm standing right here."

"You'll be just like your father."

"We won't know until you do it." Calla shrugged.

But the witch looked over her shoulder and from the shadows the vampire emerged licking his pointed teeth.

*We dusted that vamp!* Norman sounded outraged. *What happened to the good old days when a stake through the heart killed a vampire?*

"He's not just a vampire," the witch smiled. "Tis true, he is a

bloodsucking fiend. But he's also my lawyer. Much harder to kill. They're like cockroaches."

The lawyer threw itself at Calla and with one sweep of Spiny Norman she sent his teeth one way and his face the other. The creature clapped a hand to its mouth and spat out blood and bits of ivory. Shocked, it sank to its knees. Calla took one glance at Kai and saw he'd made a small fire from ripped up broadsheets lit with a tindertwig. As he dropped the fairy dust the flames briefly shone blue. The feather and the powdered mummy were next. Almost done. She turned back to the witch.

"Just you and me," she planted a boot on the lawyer's shoulder and pushed him flat onto the ground. "What you going to do about it now?"

"Foolish girl. My visions have pierced the veil of time! It was foretold you would be here and come bearing the Blade of Eragon, delivering into my hands the one thing I need to make my revenge complete!"

"Uh, no." Calla shook her head. "Sorry, wrong. Just me and Spiny Norman. What's with that sword of Eragon stuff? That was disintegrated by the Wizards of the Beach last spring when they took on the Band of the Blade. I guess it's true, huh?"

The witch seemed badly shaken, "What? Disintegrated? You're sure you don't have it on you anywhere? Maybe a lost fragment?" Then her eye narrowed "What do you mean: true?"

"My father told me about you. You're a fraud. Your spells always misfire. Your divinations are always wrong. You couldn't scry the truth if it was chewing on your backside."

"Lies! Your father is incapable of telling the truth," the witch screamed and a beam of red energy speared from her hand at Calla. But at the last moment it swerved and struck the lawyer, setting him ablaze.

"The only real question," Calla said, stepping aside to avoid the flaming creature as it ran howling from the chamber, "is how you managed to cast a curse on my father in the first place. But even a stopped clock is right twice a day."

It was pure spite, and mostly conjecture, since her father had never said a thing about the Witch, but Calla was in a mood to break things. The witch's mouth dropped open and she turned

away, unsteady. Behind her, Kai's voice rang out:

"Klaatu, Barada, Nikto!"

As Calla turned, Tromeros' ring on Kai's finger glowed and the same glow enveloped her father for the briefest of moments. As he blinked and reason came back into his eyes the dawn broke, pale orange like Calla's hair, over all of them. Calla ran and threw her arms about him and he staggered under her weight but hugged her back.

"Daddy!"

"Sweetpea," he said into her hair and twirled her around. "Wha—what are you doing out of school? And why am I wearing my nightrobe in this ruin? Hell's bells, where am I?"

"It's a long story, uncle." Kai patted him on the shoulder. Steering him so that his back was to the witch. "How about you hook us up with a teleportation to the Manse?"

"Er, sure. Where are we though?"

"Please, daddy?"

"Fine, fine. Teleportation, then answers."

"One more thing first."

*Finally! The smiting! Spiny Norman* said gleefully.

"Yes," Calla produced the potion bottle and broke it with one swing of the flail. Immediately the streetlight, barely visible by morning's illumination, swam in a circle above their heads. "Go ahead, moonbeam. What are the charges?"

"Against you? I reluctantly see you were acting for the benefit of the law." The wisp said gruffly.

"No charges?" Kai said hopefully.

"Don't misquote me, young man. There will certainly be charges: illegal use of necromancy, threatening minors with arcane harm. Immolating a barrister. The witch has much to answer for."

"Better hurry if you want to catch her," Calla gestured over her shoulder at the rapidly dwindling spot of the witch flying away.

"Oh, no, not on my beat, you don't." And with that the wisp sped off.

Dyschoraf the Blue Mage rolled up his sleeves to teleport them home and paused to admonish them both. "I thought I told you to never stop to speak to lawyers?"

“Don’t worry, dad, we don’t know any.” Calla snugged an arm around him.

They were home in time for breakfast. It was all over except for her mother’s shouting. •

# It Being

Gary L. Pierluigi

the mirror image of matter,  
the inbuilt arrow of time we call  
the soul, the heart, immortality.

Symbolize it. Theorize it. Eulogize it.

Is there a room  
without description? A depth  
as bottomless as endless as deep space?

Symbolize it. Theorize it. Eulogize it.

Asymmetrical.  
Black and white day and night  
the material universe  
the tenacity of pigweed thistles bird nests  
fields of flame scorching splintered darkness  
without moon or sun  
soundless apotheosis.

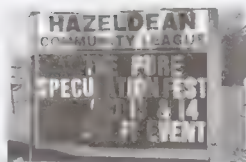
Symbolize it. Theorize it. Eulogize it.

Did you notice it? The weight of snow.  
The A&P bag full of zero fat foods.  
The mystery of "it" a muzzle of bees. •

# PURE SPECULATION 3

THE SEARCH FOR SPEC  
October 13-14, 2007

All photos by  
David Chapman



**This Page** (clockwise from left): **Erin Scott**, winner of best super hero costume, with her Bioware prize swag; **Brian Guay** from Out of Mind Studios in the Vendor Room; Organizer **Anita Kuny** and volunteers **Morgan Smith & Danica LeBlanc** shake their booty on the dancefloor. **Opposite Page, Top:** Demonstration of the card game **Gloom** by Atlas Games ([atlas-games.com](http://atlas-games.com)); **Middle:** **Todd Bertsch**, Klingon member of the IKV Swifthawk playing **Diversion 7** with Edmonton creator **Tom Mayes** ([boardgames.ca](http://boardgames.ca)); Cloaked volunteer who can stare the pants off a wizard; **Bottom:** Happy Harbor Comic shop owner **Jay Bardyla** as Captain Marvel—Shazam!; 'Mystery Wrestler' **Chris Peterson** from Calgary's Vicious Ambitious comic studio; **Opus** (aka Ron Ferguson) in all his uh, 'fairy gothmother' glory.

In other **Pure Spec** news, **Con Spec III** was stimulating and included discussions about writing Science Fiction and Fantasy, including an interview with *On Spec Fiction* 98 on **spec** fall 2007



Editor and the convention's **Guest of Honour Peter Watts**, conducted by author **Barbara Galler-Smith**. Other esteemed author guests (and *On Spec* alumni) included **Ann Marston** and **Robert Burke Richardson**, current *On Spec* fiction editor **Susan MacGregor**, Managing Editor **Diane Walton**, and novelists **Amber Hayward** and **JYT Kennedy**. Panel topics included **Getting Started as a Writer**, **Dealing with Rejection**, **What Can a Writers' Critique Group Do For Me?**, and the very popular and no holds barred **Writers' Jam Session** (subtitled **Talk Amongst Yourselves**). It's amazing to see what happens when you get a bunch of writers together to just talk about writing!

**Pure Speculation IV** is already in the planning stages, with **Robert J. Sawyer** as the special guest author. Keep watching the *On Spec*, *Pure Spec* & *Happy Harbor* websites for updates: [onspec.ca](http://onspec.ca), [purespec.org](http://purespec.org) or [happyharborcomics.com](http://happyharborcomics.com).

• **CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS** •

# TESSERACTS

## 12



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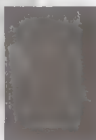
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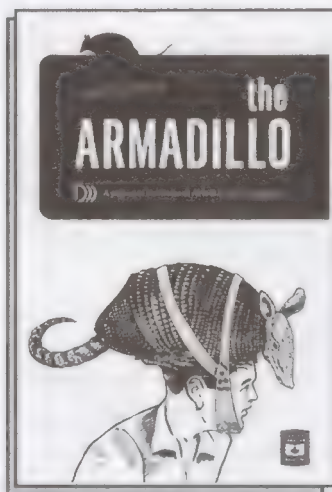
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# about our contributors

**A.M. Arruin** lives in an abandoned hotel near the Porcupine Hills. He has not slept in eleven years, and cannot remember what the "A.M." stands for.

**Leah Bobet** lives in Toronto, where she studies linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, and several Year's Best collections, and her poetry has been nominated for the Rhysling and Pushcart Prizes. See Leah's extended bio on page 16 of this issue!

**Marie Brennan** is an anthropologist and folklorist who shamelessly pillages her academic fields for material. Her short stories have sold to more than a dozen venues including *Talebones*, *Jabberwocky*, *Aberrant Dreams*, and *Weird Tales*. Her first two novels, *Doppelganger* and its sequel *Warrior and Witch*, were published this year by Warner Books. More information on the novels and her short stories may be found at [www.swantower.com](http://www.swantower.com).

**David Chapman** is an entertainment technician, administrator, and photographer from Red Deer. His company Rattenfanger Radio produces short radio dramas, including several stories adapted from *On Spec*, which can be heard at [www.members.shaw.ca/ratten](http://www.members.shaw.ca/ratten). In his day job he gets yelled at by angry Americans. In 1998 he was named a descendant of one of the "130 lost children of Hameln" that were led away by the Pied Piper in the famous story. David swears it's true.

**David Clink** was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, and Toronto, Ontario. He is the webmaster of [poetrymachine.com](http://poetrymachine.com), a resource for poets. He is the Artistic Director of the Rowers Pub Reading Series. He is the author of 5 poetry chapbooks, including *One Dozen* published in May 2007. David's poetry has appeared recently in *The Antigonish Review*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain Magazine*, and *The Literary Review of Canada*. His first book of poetry will be published by Tightrope Books in Spring 2008.

**Wesley Herbert:** It's been a long time since a Wesley Herbert story has graced our pages, but he was quite prolific back in the day. Stories

such as *Crossroads* (Fall 1992), *Too Clean to Be Dead* (Spring 1994), *Director's Cut* (Summer 1994), and *Twilight of the Real* (Winter 1997), gave us a very good reason to miss him terribly when he stopped submitting his work to us. *Was he abducted by aliens during those lost years?* Perhaps we'll never know. At any rate, we're glad he's back.

**Rose Hunter** has had short stories and poetry published in numerous literary journals including *Lichen*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and *Wet Ink* (Australia). Her fiction will soon be published in *Pilot Pocket Book 3*. She also writes articles for sports magazines, and is also a contributing author to *Aethlon: The Journal of Sports Literature*. Rose is originally from Australia but now resides in Toronto.

**Adrian Kleinbergen** is an Edmonton-born Canadian artist. In addition to drawing, painting and caricature, he designs and manufactures jewellery, and enjoys sculpture, writing, costuming and even magic. He began his artistic career in comics in 1987 by pencilling, inking and colouring Gordon Derry's *Starstone* and *Darkwood* comics (*Aircel Publishing*, Ottawa), and ran his own comic publishing company, *Ground Zero Graphics*, which published *The Shadowwalker Chronicles* in 1991. Adrian was the primary artist and a columnist for the national magic magazine, *The Servante*. He was one of the original artists for *On Spec* and *Neo-opsis* magazines, illustrating both covers and interior art. Adrian's latest project is as writer and illustrator of the graphic novel *Frontiers*, published by *MU Press* (Seattle, Washington). Adrian has also exhibited and sold artwork through a number of venues and galleries. See [www.epilogue.net/cgi/database/art/list.pl?gallery=9236](http://www.epilogue.net/cgi/database/art/list.pl?gallery=9236) and [www.smallmountain.homestead.com/kleinbergenexhibit.html](http://www.smallmountain.homestead.com/kleinbergenexhibit.html).

**Scott Mackay** has published over forty-five short stories in magazines such as *Science Fiction Age*, *On Spec*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Interzone*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. He's winner of the Arthur Ellis Award for best mystery short story, as well as the Okanagan Award for best literary short fiction. Scott is the author of nine novels, including *Outpost* (Tor 1998), *The Meek* (Roc 2001), *Orbis* (Roc 2002), and *Omnifix* (Roc 2004), which was listed at number 6 on the *Locus* bestsellers list. *The Meek* was a John W.

Campbell Memorial Award finalist for best SF novel of 2001. Prometheus Books published his latest SF novel, *Tides*, under the Pyr imprint in fall 2005. Recently, he sold two new novels to Roc, *Phytosphere*, which will appear in 2007, and *Omega Sol*, which will appear in 2008. His books have appeared in six languages.

**Trevor Morrison** lives with his girlfriend Carolyn in Victoria, where he works part-time for B.C.'s Ministry of Education while pursuing degrees in creative writing and astronomy at the University of Victoria. Between bouts of literary productivity, he drums in an acoustic quintet called the Insignificant Figures. Previous stories have appeared in *Black Petals Science Fiction and Horror Magazine* and *Midnight Times*.

**Gary Pierluigi** was an ex-journalist and Social Services Worker who, in 1996, became a quadriplegic. He has been published in numerous Literary Journals, including *Queen's Quarterly*, *CV2*, and *Quills*. He was short listed for the 2006 CBC Literary Awards, and received an honourable mention in the Ontario Poetry Society's *Open Heart* Contest. He currently has a poetry collection under review for possible publication, and is completing a book of short stories. He now writes full time.

**Chandra Rooney's** favourite memory of her last visit to Japan involves a Shinto temple crawl through Kamakura in the rain, which proves that it's neither the umbrella nor the weather, but the company that one is with when one gets soaked through up to her knees that really matters. *The Rainy Season* is her first piece of published fiction, and she is currently polishing a manuscript that tells the tale of its honey-eyed stranger. Her writing blog can be found at [www.coffeeden.blogspot.com](http://www.coffeeden.blogspot.com).

**Greg Wilson** teaches computer science at the University of Toronto. His daughter is the most beautiful baby in the world.

**in upcoming issues...** Great new fiction by Angela Slatter, Marissa Gritter, Liz Shannon Miller, Jack Skillingstead, Hannah Strom-Martin, Nancy Chenier, Jared Young, Bruce Barber, Sarah Carless, Elise C. Tobler, Sandra Riedel, David Yeh, Matthew Moore, Greg Wilson, Steve Stanton and Saint James Harris Wood. Great new poetry by Steve Sneyd, I.B. Iskov, Claire Litton, Michael Meyerhofer, Randy Schroeder, Gary Pierluigi, Evan Hazenberg, Desi Di Nardo, Leah Bobet and more.

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